

# The Runaway Princess

and other  
Stories

Helen Nde

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Cover Design by Helen Nde

Editing by Nancy Albright & Sarah O'Neal

Formatting by Megan McCullough

Translations by Ubong Edison

Sensitivity Reading by Angel Nduka-Nwosu, Jonathan Tserayi, Lebohang Mojapelo & Bukky Imoyo

Cover Illustration by Mark Mengjo

To Susan Ahibonou. Thank you for the gift of words.

To Mami Helen Mankwai and Mami Julia Yoneh.  
Thank you for giving me the right names.

To all my mothers, across time, place, and space.  
Thank you.



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# introduction

When I started curating Mythological Africans, I was immediately drawn to stories of girls and women, especially the ones I didn't already know. To my delight, I was introduced to a world of sages, sorceresses, mothers, monsters, seekers, healers, sisters, leaders, warriors, survivors, rebels and more. As I read their stories, I grew curious about what their inner worlds might be like. Traditional folktales, as you may know, don't spend too much time on feelings and thoughts. My retellings of these folktales focus on what I imagine the aspirations and motivations of the girls and women in the stories might be. In the four original short stories, I explore cultural dynamics as I imagine the girls and women experienced them. I am especially attached to Yennenga's story. As the titular character and a prominent woman in African folklore, it was incredibly empowering to read the many (and sometimes conflicting) accounts of her life and craft a nuanced narrative.

I am deeply inspired by Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison, two ancestresses of the Black African Diaspora. The former for her painstaking work of documenting the lives and stories of her Black American kin at a time when

the mainstream American literary tradition reduced them to little more than figures on which to project racist ideals which blurred the line between the ennobling and the dehumanizing. The latter for her exhortation to write those books one wants to read which have not yet been written. The book I wanted to read is the book I have written. I hope you enjoy it!

Helen Nde

# Prose



# Mother, Monster

*Hadjerai, Chad*

“THERE WAS ONCE a beautiful woman possessed by a great margai. This margai was good and generous so wherever the woman lived, the people prospered. The rains regularly visited the lands with gifts of fresh water. The winds, careful not to blow too strongly, caressed the fields of millet so they grew tall and stout. The bushes readily offered yams, groundnuts, fresh green leaves for soups, and sweet, juicy berries and fruit. Women and children came home with baskets overflowing. So generous was the land to the people, termites, birds, and game seemed to seek out and fling themselves into the catchers’ baskets, nets, and traps. Even in that desperate time between the dry and rainy season when hunger’s gaunt form roamed the land, people in the woman’s village always had plenty to eat and drink. Illness avoided them. Babies were born strong and healthy. People lived to old age and died with dignity. Love for life was a light in the villager’s eyes, and death, a

welcome rest. And so, the people loved this woman and the margai. They sang their praises and offered them sacrifices of meat and grain. Nourished by their devotion, the woman and the margai grew even more powerful.

But some chiefs in nearby villages were jealous of the woman. Their margai weren't as powerful as the woman's margai. Their lands didn't offer them much. Their people didn't love them the way the woman's people loved her. *A woman can't be chief!* They said amongst themselves. *And nobody should be so loved, or a margai so venerated! There must be some foul magic at work there!* They tried to destroy the woman and her margai, attacking in every conceivable way. But together, the pair stood great and strong like the mountain on which their village sat.

After trying everything they could, the chiefs realized that the only way to destroy the woman and the margai was to make people distrust them. They came together and plotted. Then they began to call the woman a sorceress who bound people in vicious spells so she could suck out their souls and feed on their flesh. They told their people and anyone who would listen to fear the woman. It took some time but the chiefs were persistent and eventually, people began to fear the woman. They avoided her village, refusing to trade with or marry her people. They shuddered in fright when the margai was mentioned. Soon, all sacrifices to the margai stopped. The sky mourned the schism in rains that fell like angry tears. In the dry season, the sun glared furiously from the sky. The wind howled in fury and lashed at the land which, in response, closed its open hand. Crops began to fail. Season after season, the millet harvest got smaller and smaller. The bushes sent women and children home with empty baskets. The birds left the trees and didn't return to nest and breed. Swarms of termites flew around aimlessly at night. Slowly, and then in desperate waves, people started leaving the

village until at last the woman, who was now alone and starved of the people's devotion, died from old age. The margai, having no one to remember it, retreated to the mountain."

Konara finishes the story and watches her daughter, Djunu, smack her lips and lick her fingers clean of esh and moulah. Djunu is beautiful, her smooth, dark oil-smeared face a miniature of her mothers'. Her soul, when Konara inhales, smells fresh and pure - a soft light to the jagged-edged darkness churning Konara's belly. Konara's heart swells with love and pride. *Child of mine. My blessing. Born to prove my power.* Djunu's eyes meet hers when she murmurs the words.

"My beautiful Djunu," Konara smiles. "My precious child. You'll be so great. You'll be so powerful!"

"Beautiful and powerful like you, Mother?" Djunu asks lowering her gaze from her mother's.

"More beautiful and more powerful!" Konara replies, her smile widening at the exchange they always have at the end of the story.

"Beautiful and powerful like the woman in the story?" Djunu continues. A half-smile curves her lips, but she keeps her gaze lowered.

"More beautiful and more powerful!" Konara confirms confidently, reaching over to wipe oily moulah from Djunu's cheek. *Child of mine. My blessing. Born to prove my power.*

Her love for Djunu rises from deep within her and spreads until it seems a vast dome of sky above them. Konara knows this vast, open love-sky. Her father's had been one in which she'd rarely ever seen clouds of worry or anger gather to cast a shadow over the land of her contentment. This was a good thing because Konara was always hungry. Hungry for that love-sky and everything it covered. Her grandmother often remarked to her father that Konara's

mother created a hunger which could never be satisfied when she died during childbirth, taking the child's milk with her. Konara believed her. There was no sating her hunger, and she always got what she wanted back then. That knowledge doubled her satisfaction. Her father was the chief, and with his approval she'd been excluded from tedious chores and endless requirements for proper behavior. Free to roam the farmstead, Konara had done as she pleased despite protests from the women in her family.

But then everything changed the night her father ignored her grandmother's objections and let Konara join him and the bird trappers. She'd danced in glee as the men gathered up clouds of quelea birds in their nets like the women in their farmstead scooped up handfuls of millet. Her excitement grew as she listened to the squeaking panic of the birds and the sound of their desperately fluttering wings. A buzz of satisfaction settled in her belly when she saw the piles of bags in which hundreds of birds were slowly suffocating to death, the warm mass of their shuddering fear wrapping around her like a soft covering. She'd watched, enthralled by the gurgle and spill of red blood in golden lamplight when the throats of the birds selected for sacrifice were slit. She'd looked up at her father, expecting the warm sun of his approval, and met dark skies and chilly wind. *We thank the margai for giving us food, Konara. We don't rejoice in another creature's suffering or death.* His gently spoken rebuke, the first she'd ever heard from him, was lightning-sharp thunder tearing across the love-sky, rending her world apart.

*I want no storm clouds in my daughter's skies,* Konara thinks to herself, pushing away the foul memory. *I want her to know her beauty and power when she looks into my eyes. I want her to see all the stars in the night sky and know that if she wants them, she can scoop them up in the net of her desire like quelea birds.*

Konara spends the rest of that day lost in a haze of memories. After that night with the birds, her father started leaving her to her grandmother's care hoping to blunt the sharp edge of her appetites. But that didn't worry Konara. She had beauty. The kind that demanded nothing short of adulation. The kind women killed rivals over and men died fighting for. Oath-making and oath-breaking beauty. Away from her father's stormy disapproval, she found bright skies in other men who beamed attention on her. It was a competition of suns, each with its own pull, weighted in gifts and pleasure. Happy with her options, she'd rejected all suitors and not even the sidelong glances or whispers of other girls and women in the village could change her mind. Why risk unfavorable weather when she only had to tell the man she wanted when she would visit his hut, or when he could come to hers? Besides, nothing could satisfy her hunger. Not the fine loincloths or gold jewelry which eager, hopeful suitors started bringing after her nang ceremony announced she was ready for marriage. Not food, millet beer, or potions drunk, and leaves smoked from clay pipes in her lovers' beds. Not the other women's jealousy which wafted from them like hyena stink. She started avoided them, forfeiting the freedom and excess of the nights unmarried men and women from the village gathered to sing and dance. The men followed her anyway and she devoured them, taking them hard and fast, riding their sweaty hips with skilled abandon. But even then, her hunger remained, a grasping hand in her center, ever reaching for more, a gaping mouth between her legs, a yawning hole she'd thought would never be filled as long as she lived. Until

*he* came. Konara smiles, thinking of her husband as he was the day they first met. Tall and darker than a night sky, with a smile brighter than a shimmer of stars, Garsoli had walked into her father's farmstead one night, seemingly materializing from the darkness beyond. He'd called out a greeting and stopped, neck cobra-long and proud, to survey the family gathered around the fire. Konara wanted him as soon as she saw him. When her father offered Garsoli a place to rest for the night, she'd welcomed the chance to eat and drink with him, ignoring the coldness in her father's tone when he asked if she knew the man. They'd stayed up, drinking millet beer, talking, and laughing late into the night.

"I've heard about you, Konara," Garsoli had told her, stroking the smooth skin of her cheek almost reverently. "You are unbelievably beautiful. I like beautiful things."

Konara preened at his praise. When he'd asked if she wanted to share his bed, she'd simply let her loinloth fall in response. Later that night, she traced and kissed the bands of light brown skin on his smooth chest and told him, her voice pleasure-hoarse, that whoever he was, wherever he came from, she would follow him when he left. Garsoli smiled and gathered her into his arms for more lovemaking. She'd given in, ignoring her sore muscles and the hard ground they'd moved to after breaking the bamboo bed. She fell asleep after and dreamed of unexplored bliss to come. No one was surprised the next morning when she announced she would leave with Garsoli.

"Take this and cook it for your husband," her father had said, handing her a rope at whose end a goat was tethered. "Take that too. There's millet and spices and everything you need to cook a meal." His hand trembled slightly, as he pointed at the small, hastily put together bundle. Konara had taken the goat and the bundle, trying not to giggle when she

remembered how her father came running the previous night after hearing her screams and the crashing bed.

Pulling the goat along, she'd walked quietly beside Garsoli when they left her family's farmstead, trying to keep up with his long, purposeful strides. The village quickly disappeared from sight and the bush spread around them, thick with trees in some places and covered with fields of rippling grass in others. Garsoli pressed on, neither slowing down when she asked him to, nor answering when she demanded to know where they were going. As they walked, Konara realized that the rustle of wind in the leaves of the trees above them and in the grass around them was the only sound she could hear. There were no birds calling from the sky or chirping in the trees. Nothing scurried or squeaked in the bushes around them. Even the goat had stopped its plaintive bleating and walked along, scampering to stay close to Konara. She'd opened her mouth to comment on the silence as they rounded a corner on the path but then snapped it shut when she saw the large, black cobra coiled on the ground. It hissed, the sound loud in the unnaturally quiet bush. Undaunted, Garsoli continued to walk toward the creature, his tall, proud form seeming to reduce in stature the closer he got to it. Meanwhile, the snake, as if putting on the required muscles one by one, slowly lifted its thick, muscled body and broad-hooded head to reveal the bands of light brown markings on its neck and belly. When Garsoli reached the snake and stood in front of it, the reptile lowered to the ground and silently slithered into the bush. Ignoring Konara's concerned questions, Garsoli kept on walking, now hunched over as if his head weighed too much. Later in the afternoon, they stopped at a tree whose dark green leaves hid a scattering of sallow, white fruit. Konara reached up to touch one of the fruits, wondering what blight had made them rot when the leaves seemed so healthy, then

snatched her hand away when the tree shuddered. Alarmed, she'd looked over at Garsoli who'd his cupped hands over his mouth. He grunted softly and then flung his hands up toward the tree. Whatever he threw hit the leaves in a flurry of what sounded like little pebbles, but nothing fell to the ground. Just as with the snake, he walked away from the tree without saying a word. Konara followed him but her steps faltered when she cast a curious glance back at the tree and saw that it was now heavy with plump, white fruit. Confused, she'd grabbed Garsoli's hand.

"Those fruit look ripe for harvesting," she'd suggested.

"Let us eat some and rest under the tree."

Garsoli turned around she'd gaped at his transformed face. The man with sunken cheeks, lifeless eyes, and mottled, wrinkled skin looked nothing like the man she'd spent the previous night with. He'd even shrunk in stature so his black tunic hung from his now bony frame.

"We must keep going," he'd said, his voice still a low, smooth rumble which sounded wrong coming from someone so ugly. "The sun will set soon, and we must get to our destination before then."

"Where are we going?" Konara asked, unable to look away from his grotesque face. Garsoli didn't answer. He turned around and kept walking.

Konara watched him walk away, her heart pounding loud enough she could hear her fear. She'd contemplated going back home. These were familiar bushes. She and her sisters had wandered this far in search of food so she knew the way. She'd taken a step back prepared to leave, and then paused when the words Garsoli had whispered the previous night, the little encouragements he'd given and the promises he'd made as he seasoned pleasure with pain, slithered into her mind. Her body softened and moistened in remembrance and anticipation. Pulling the

goat along, she'd scurried after him. Hearing her footsteps, he'd graciously stopped, turned around, and waited. When she held her hand out to him, he'd reached out to take it, a knowing smile on his face. They'd kept walking, Garsoli seemingly tireless as he glided on. Konara followed, panting lightly, and tugging the goat along. When he stopped suddenly and turned toward her, she sighed in relief.

"Do you know this place?" he asked, eyeing the goat hungrily.

"Yes," Konara replied. "My sisters and I have gathered food from around here."

Looking disappointed, he'd grunted and resumed walking. They stopped again when the sun hung lower in the sky, already well on its way toward the mountain behind which it rested for the night. Garsoli repeated his question, his gaze lingering again on the goat.

"Yes," Konara nodded. With an impatient huff Garsoli kept on walking, his pace even faster than before. The next time he'd asked his question, the sun's final rays lit the sky molten-red and Konara didn't know where she was anymore.

"No," she'd snapped, out of breath and irritated. "I've never come this far from the village."

"Give me the goat," Garsoli demanded, holding out a hand.

"But we are still in the bush," Konara protested. "The goat is for your soup. There is nowhere to kill and cook it here."

Garsoli said nothing. He'd kept his hand held out, looking at Konara expectantly. When she didn't comply, he smiled. It was an ugly and predatory smile which made Konara quickly hand him the rope. The goat bled a complaint which ended in a red gurgle as Garsoli ripped its head off with his bare hands, tore into its body and buried his face in the quivering mass of raw flesh and blood. Frozen in place, Konara watched in fascinated horror as he ate, his grunts

and snarls loud in the too-quiet dusk. The hand in her center reached out for some of Garsoli's enjoyment and the mouth between her legs echoed the demand. She'd found herself thinking about that night with the birds, realizing that the possibility of this kind of unbridled excess was what she'd sensed, and what her father had rejected her for wanting. A bloody tuft of hair from the goat's tail landed on her foot and, absentmindedly, Konara had picked it up and slid it into the folds of her loincloth as Garsoli ate the last of the goat's flesh. Her mouth opened in a silent scream when Garsoli, who she now knew to be a flesh eating sorcerer, turned his still-hungry gaze in her direction. In a blur of movement, he'd seized her and tangled his bloody hands in her hair, angling her neck for his bite.

"Man doesn't eat human flesh!" A high, nasal voice, reminiscent of the goat's bleats, pierced the quiet night.

"Who said that?" Garsoli asked, drawing her so close she could smell his bloody breath and see the bits of flesh caught between his teeth. Konara closed her eyes and held her breath. He'd searched her, leaving streaks of blood as his hands lingered over her bare breasts and paused over her belly. Then, he'd looked up at her suddenly, a delirious light in his nightmare eyes.

"Konara," he'd breathed in wonder. "Oh Konara, you're going to make me so happy!"

Straightening up, his search completely forgotten, Garsoli had grabbed her hand and pulled her along with him. She'd followed, terrified, and confusingly aroused. He'd searched the bushes around them as they walked and then suddenly veered off the path, leading her toward a large termite mound silhouetted in the dusk. When they reached it, he'd taken her by the shoulders, sat her on the mound and stood facing her.

Expecting to die soon, Konara had wiped her fear-wetted palms on her thighs and closed her eyes when he began to chant.

“What do you see Konara?” Garsoli asked after some time had passed. She’d opened her eyes and then blinked confusedly when she realized her vision was blurry. She could barely make out the trees around her, or the mountains in the distance but she knew it wasn’t completely dark. The sun was still a hint of red gold over the mountain peaks.

“Nothing. Everything is blurry as in a fog.”

“Hmmm...” Garsoli mused. “Close your eyes again.”

She’d complied, relieved that he no longer seemed eager to eat her.

“What do you see, Konara?” he asked again after chanting longer than before. She opened her eyes expectantly, but her vision was still blurry. Disappointed but not sure why, she’d taken a deep breath to calm herself and then gasped when knowledge of her surroundings flooded her lungs. She could smell the sun-warm soil of the termite mound and sense the crawling mass of life within it. She could even smell their intense fear of Garsoli’s presence. She could smell the green life of the grass and trees around her, how the sap of their essence strained away from Garsoli. She could also tell that aside from the termites and the plants, there wasn’t a single living thing in their vicinity. She’d looked up at Garsoli, her mouth open in awe, and he smiled at her.

“Close your eyes again,” he’d murmured. Her eyes were closed before he finished speaking. He resumed the chants and Konara felt the words land on her skin, burning lightly like ash from a wildfire. “What do you see, Konara?” he’d asked finally, after chanting for so long, the words had wrapped Konara in a soft, fiery cocoon. She’d known what she would see before she opened her eyes.

Later that day, hunger pulls Konara from the daze of her recollections. She checks to make sure Djunu is asleep before leaving to join Garsoli who'd left some minutes earlier to wait for her in the bushes just outside their village. Garsoli mostly ignores Djunu but Konara doesn't mind. Her love is all the child needs, and it grows everyday. She'd realized she was pregnant not long after they arrived at Garsoli's village. The people stared openly at Konara's swelling belly, fearfully shifting their eyes away when she returned their gazes. They never spoke to her or Garsoli, but they left gifts of grain and vegetables, chicken, sheep, goats, millet beer, and water, hoping to appease them and secure their safety. Garsoli ate the animals and ignored everything else. They had so much food, Konara didn't need to trade or work for anything. But this meant nothing to her, since every night, Garsoli would take his staff and a vulture skull which he placed on top of his head, and leave their farmstead, returning with food for Konara. The first time he'd brought a muscled thigh still twitching as if the man was trying to run. Then he'd brought a warm, wet heart. Then a meaty liver. Konara devoured it all without question, relishing the savage power of eating human flesh. After Djunu was born, a normal human baby, Garsoli presented Konara with a staff and vulture skull of her own, and she'd started joining his nightly hunts. They raided the surrounding villages, visiting terror on the people in sudden bursts of violence. Konara was insatiable. She'd gorged herself on human flesh, leaving their souls for Garsoli who devoured them in his cobra form. Word soon spread about the deadly couple and their human child but no one dared confront them.

Instead, terrified people brought them gifts of food, drink, cloth, jewels, and more, hoping to be spared their wrath.

Light from the full moon illuminates her path as she slips through the quiet village, headed for the bushes where Garsoli waits. Konara knows Djunu is safe at home but she worries. Djunu is an intelligent child. Konara doesn't doubt she knows what her parents are, where they go every night, what they do. When she'd asked Garsoli what would happen to Djunu as she aged, he'd told her the story of the beautiful woman and the margai. She'd looked at him confusedly, and he'd chuckled before explaining.

"Our power is from the margai too, but because we take what is not freely offered, it is corrupted. There is only so much we can do with it. The girl is born of beauty and power, yours, and mine. She is good and pure, so when we present her to the margai, she'll be like the woman in the story. She won't need to hunt like us. People will offer their bodies and souls to her and she'll rule over them and their lands. We'll protect her and make sure of it."

This promise of a different future for Djunu, one in which she would be loved and respected, not feared, was enough for Konara. But then, word had come from her father asking Konara to bring Djunu to him so she could be raised like a normal child. Konara drove the messenger away and the young man had been all too happy to leave the strange farmstead littered with bones and piles of rotting food. Her father's next message, a threat, had come just some days ago.

"Bring us the girl or we will kill you and take her away!"

In a fit of rage, Konara had broken the messenger's neck, ripped his chest open, and eaten his still-beating heart. Later that night, she and Garsoli had visited her father's farmstead. She didn't regret killing her father and everyone in his farmstead but

news of the massacre caused an exodus from the surrounding area. But Garsoli had insisted on continuing to hunt away from their community, even if it meant they had to travel further, and grew weaker between meals.

"The girl will need people who know her," he'd explained. "People who will come to love her and then tell others about her when she helps them."

Konara agreed to his plan. Anything that would secure Djunu's future was worth a try.

She finds Garsoli waiting under a tree, vulture skull in place. When he smiles and holds out his hand, she steps forward and takes it.

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Djunu knows the man is her relative as soon as she sees him in the light of the full moon. He stops his horse at the entrance to their farmstead and surveys the rotting waste, disgust curling his red-tinged lips so similar to her mother's. She's suddenly filled with joy at the realization that she still has family other than her parents. She'd been there, hiding behind a wall when her grandfather's last messenger came. She'd watched her mother kill the man. She'd also watched her parents leave that night, knowing what they were going to do. A small part of her had celebrated when she heard her parents talking about how much further they now had to travel to find people to feed on. She knows their efforts have been increasingly futile of late. She is suddenly afraid for this man, who might be her last remaining relative.

"You have to leave!" she cries, running toward him." My parents will be back soon. They will kill you and eat you if they find you here."

The man ignores her warnings, dismounts, and walks further into the compound. The sleekly curved, deadly sharp throwing knives hanging on his belt glint in the moonlight.

“You have to leave!” Djunu continues to plead. “Go back to where you came from, please!” When they meet, she pushes him back toward his horse at the entrance, trying to use her small body to bar him from going any further.

“They have killed everyone in our farmstead,” the man says, grabbing her arms. “I am Adem, your granduncle. Your mother ate her father, my brother. They both have to die.”

“You don’t understand!” Djunu wails. “They haven’t been eating well since everyone left. They are hungry. They will kill you and eat you.”

“They have to die,” Adem repeats, softly, almost apologetically. He opens his mouth to speak again but he is interrupted by his horse’s loud scream. He shoves Djunu behind him and turns toward the sound, a throwing knife in his hand. When Djunu peers from behind him, she sees her parents advancing. Her mother looks furious. Adem’s throwing knives vault through the night sky and her mother jolts back, shrieking. A splash of dark blood spurts from where her arm used to be. Her mother casts a furious glance at Adem, and then turns to snarl at Djunu’s father who’s picked up and is hungrily gnawing at her limb.

“It will give me the strength I need,” she hears her father mutter between hungry bites, undisturbed by the repugnance of his actions. That brief moment of distraction is all Adem needs. His throwing knives embed deep themselves into her parents’ bodies and they fall to the ground. Screaming, Djunu tries to run toward her parents, but Adem holds her, hiding her face in the folds of his clothes.

When the night falls quiet again, he speaks “Djunu, there are things I must do to make sure they can’t come back. Things you can’t see. Will you wait for me inside?”

She nods silently, still sobbing and allows Adem to guide her into the hut. He joins her later, smelling of smoke and burnt flesh, and starts a fire on which he sets a huge pot of water to heat. When it steams, he procures a sheaf of tamarind leaves from his bag and drops them into the pot. The leaves' fragrant scent soon fills the room, mingling with the ever-present scent of death and decay. When the water cools, Adem calls Djunu to him.

"Did they ever give you human flesh?" he asks, tension roughening his voice. He lifts his eyes upward in gratitude when Djunu shakes her head no. "I'll wash you with this water," he explains. "It has medicine that will remove anything they ever put on you."

He chants softly under his breath as he pours the water on her.

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Before they leave the next morning, Djunu asks Adem what he did to her parents.

"The only way to kill sorcerers like them is to cut their bodies into small pieces, burn them to ash, and pour water on the ashes until there is nothing left." He points at a large, wet spot of sooty, dark soil near the entrance as he speaks. Djunu stares at the spot for a long time and Adem lets her.

"We should go," Adem says finally. "It's a week's walk to my village."

Djunu takes his hand as they leave.

"I know my family will be happy to see you," he assures her. "We were away the night of the attack. We are your only family left."

She doesn't look back at the farmstead but she makes a promise to her mother. She knows which mountain the margai lives on. She knows where to find it.

*The End.*

# Ndhawu Ya Hina Ya Ntsako (Our Place of Happiness)

*Tsonga, Mozambique*

*Chipfalamfula*

THEY CALL ME Chipfalamfula, the “River Shutter” even though I am of the sea. They fear me for, when I swim up the wide mouth of the river seeking fresh inland water, I block the river, flooding the surrounding lands. But they understand the reason for my existence. They know I am a keeper of balance. A preserver of life. A custodian of death. They also know who lives inside me. People from among their own. People they reject: the sick, the differently abled and formed, both young and old. People they cast away: the ones who don’t meet their standards of who and what a person should be, the ones who reject their standards of who and what a person should be, the ones who remind them of the many ways in which they don’t live up to their own ideals of who and what a person should be. I take them all in. Sometimes, they come voluntarily, seeking the

fluid oblivion of my embrace. Sometimes, they are forced or abandoned. Other times, I compel the people my spirit messengers tell me need the sanctuary in my belly where they can be happy, free, and cared for. Where they can live, love, and be in peace, away from prying eyes and vicious mouths.

Who are these spirit messengers, you might wonder. They are all around you, always listening, always watching. They live in the air you breathe, in the earth you stand upon. They cry and rage in the rain and smile in the sunshine. They are silent sentinels in the still rocks and keen investigators in the blowing wind. They fly with the birds and swim with the fish. Do you see that old man sitting in the shade of that tree spreading its branches over there? I know every thought in his mind, every loving or fearful wish in his heart. He breathes them to the tree and the tree tells the bird you hear chirping in its branches. The bird sings what it hears across the land as it flies, telling the antelopes chewing grass in the fields. The antelopes whisper to the fish when they come to the river to drink. The fish swim down the river to the sea to tell me. In turn, I send them out with messages to the people I know will understand. People who can hear my voice in bird song, in animal cries, and in the sound of the wind blowing through the grass. People who can feel my messages in the heat of the sun or the chill of the rain. People who can smell my messages on the baboon's skin, in the feces it leaves behind. People who can see my messages in bird flight, in the patterns of animal skin, in the eland's movements, in the moon's shape, and in the arrival of the stars. Together, we keep watch over the land and all it contains. This is how I know about the girl Chichiguane and her cruelty. This is how I know I have to intervene, or her sister Chiguyane will die. This is how I know to wait near the estuary this rainy day. This is how I know the

reason for the frantic barking and howling disturbing the calming patter of raindrops on the surface of the water. I am careful not to move too fast when I swim toward the sound. The soil around there is soft and unstable. When I arrive, I see a small, black dog frantically digging at a spot in the ground where the earth is freshly turned, as if it recently caved in. The dog stops to run around in the long grasses surrounding the pits, barking, and howling as if calling for help. No help comes. The dog continues to dig, his barks eventually turning into desperate howls. I can see that he is starting to tire of his efforts and I know he doesn't have much time since the rain is starting to come down harder. The water levels will soon rise and cover the ground where he is digging. I breathe a message into the water to the fish around me. They swim with it, carrying it up the river to a spot where I know a pack of jackals usually gather. Fortunately, they are there. When they hear my message, the jackals run through the bushes to where the dog is still digging. The animal stops digging and growls when he sees the wild dogs coming toward him but relaxes when the leader of the jackal pack, a great beast with shaggy, brown hair, comes forward, ears laid back, and starts digging. The dog yips his joy and resumes his digging. The other jackals join them. It is a curious sight, a pack of over twenty animals digging furiously into the ground. The dogs' barks become more excited as the hole in the ground widens and deepens, then he lunges forward and grabs something in his jaws. It is a piece of cloth. The other animals continue digging, and soon they unearth what they have been digging for. It is a girl. I watch silently from the water as the dog pulls her out of the ground. She rolls over coughing when he starts licking the muddy soil off her face. Their work done, the jackals slink back into the surrounding bushes. It takes a while for the girl to regain her breath. When she does, she

reaches out for the dog. He runs into her arms excitedly, whining affectionately, still licking mud and tears from her face. She laughs weakly and rubs his back, murmuring softly to him.

“How did you get down there, little one?” I slide into her mind to ask the question. I have to familiarize humans with my presence before I show them my form. I’ve seen brave warriors faint when confronted with the sheer size of my body. The girl screams, springs to her feet, and looks around trying to find the source of my voice.

“You can’t see me, but I promise I’m not going to hurt you,” I assure her. “What is your name?”

“Chiguyane...” she stutters, still looking around, a wild, frightened look in her eyes. She stands, ready to run, her knees slightly bent, her fists clenched, her body trembling ever so slightly. Her stance is fearless yet resigned, like she knows what it means to stand her ground even if it means she’ll get pushed down again and again. The dog crouches next to her, growling. I remember the messages in song about her that the birds sang to the antelopes who told the fish who told me. They all spoke of her bravery.

“Do you know who I am, Chiguyane?” I ask. I am not surprised when Chiguyane nods. But when she speaks, her words thrill me.

“You are Chipfalamfula. I’ve heard the birds singing about you. The wind also whispers your name when it blows. You are the one the cows cry to when they are slaughtered. You are the one the fish call to for help when they get caught in the fishermens’ nets.”

“That’s true,” I say. “So you must know I’ll not hurt you. Tell me what happened to you.”

I know the answer to my question, but I want to hear her side of her story. You find out many things when you let people

tell you about their lives. You see the unacknowledged motives and desires in their words, in how they describe their actions relative to others. So I let Chiguyane tell me her story even though I know she is the daughter of Chief Gungunhana and Halandi, his youngest and favorite wife. Their mother's status as the favorite means Chiguyane and her sister, Namatuco, who she calls Little Sister, enjoy special privileges in their homestead. Gungunhana spends most nights in Halandi's hut and gives Chiguyane and Little Sister many gifts, like the black dog that has just saved her life. This makes the other wives and daughters jealous. They despise Halandi and treat her daughters unkindly. Chiguyane and Namatuco are the youngest in the homestead which means their ranking is low. Their sisters, with the eldest, Chichiguane, the ringleader, always find ways to make them suffer with small cruelties hidden in the folds of the garment of sibling rankings and the respect it commands. When they go to fetch water, clay, or wood, for example, Chichiguane demands that Chiguyane help everyone else before she does her share of the work.

That is how she ended up buried underground that day. The girls had come to the estuary to dig for clay used to plaster the walls of the huts in their homestead. As usual, Chichiguane forced Chiguyane to climb down to the bottom of the clay pit and dig all day, shoveling clay into baskets that the other girls lowered down to her. When their baskets were full, the older girls left Chiguyane there, refusing to help her climb out of the slick-walled pit. When the rain began to fall, filling the pit with water, she realized she'd die if she didn't find a way to climb out. When she tried digging holes in the wall to use as hand and footholds, her digging loosened the ground and a large section of the wall broke off, burying her underneath. As she speaks, I hear no bitterness in Chiguyane's voice, just melancholy acceptance of her situation.

“Come stay with me,” I say gently. “I can take you somewhere safe where no one will ever hurt you again. Come stay with me in the waters.”

Chiguyane walks to the edge of the water so I take the opportunity to examine her closely. She is covered with mud and clay, and too thin for her height, but I can see wiry muscle and determination in the set of her shoulders.

“Promise?” she asks.

“I swear it to you,” I reply, lifting my head above the surface of the water. Her eyes widen as she takes in my size. But when I open my mouth in invitation, she takes a deep breath and jumps into the water, ignoring her dog who runs along the bank, barking. As she slides down into my belly, I tell the fish to tell the dog his friend is safe.

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### *Chiguyane*

I am afraid as I slide down Chipfalamfula’s throat, carried along in the water toward her belly. I close my eyes and hold my breath, hoping the slide will be over soon. I know the stories that are told about the great fish. I know that there is a village in her belly. Can you believe it? A village in a fish’s belly! The people who tell the stories never say more than that but I hope it will be different from our village. Thinking of our village makes me think of Little Sister and Moutipi, my dog. I gasp as I realize that I may never see them again, then I panic when my mouth and lungs fill with water. I kick my feet and flail, trying to push myself toward the end of my journey. The water moves around me, pushing me forward. I let it carry me along until I feel my feet touch what feels like solid ground. I move myself forward and emerge from the

water, coughing and gasping for air, which is... there. Fresh, clean air flowing in a light, cool breeze. Astounded, I look up and around me. I am on the shores of what looks like a lake. A blue sky streaked with feathery white clouds—very much like the one I left behind—arches above me. I sense the sun and I feel its warmth, but I don't see it. In the distance, I see trees, bushes, and farms. I see people tending fields of what looks like maize and sorghum. I turn around when I hear a splash in the water. A man is rowing a boat toward the shore where I stand. I can't see his face clearly, but he is tall and thin. His deep, brown skin glistens with sweat and water as he rows. When he comes closer, I see that he is smiling broadly.

"There you are!" he cries excitedly. "Welcome! I was worried when I didn't see you at the entrance."

"The entrance?" I ask, confused by his joy at my presence and the fact that he seems to know who I am.

"Yes, yes!" He jumps into the water and wades toward me, still smiling. "The entrance that all new people come to when they arrive from the outside world." When he is standing in front of me, he places his hands on my shoulders, his smile widening even more as he looks me over. "You look just like your father!"

"Who are you?" I ask cautiously. I do look like my father. It is one of the reasons he likes me so much. But how does this man know?

"I am your kokwana on your father's side. My name is Masousoule, your father is my grandnephew. You, Chiguyane, are my great-grandniece."

I look at the man whose face doesn't look much older than my mother's.

"I know I look like I just finished my nghoma ceremony," he chuckles steering me toward his boat. "Time is different here. Slower. I came to Ndhawu before you were born.

They probably don't talk about me, so you don't know me."

He is right. Nobody in the family ever mentions his name when they talk about our vakweru – our relatives on our father's side.

"They never talk about you," I confirm.

"They think I killed myself when I jumped into the river," Masousoule says with a sad smile. "Chipfalamfula found me and took me into her belly. But you, how did you end up here? Chipfalamfula told me you were coming. What happened? Why did you leave the village?"

I start to cry.

"U nga rill... Don't cry." Masousoule pulls me into his arms with a soothing hum. "You are safe here. Come. Let us go home."

When we arrive at his homestead, he introduces me to Mbangana, his wife, and their children: Siguila and his twin Mouibia, and their sister Nyembane. He also introduces me to Kouézou, his friend who lives with them. Nyembane gives me clean, dry clothes. After I change, Mbangana brings me warm tihove with fried mopani, and Masousoule pours me a cup of vukanyi. I eat and drink in a daze, barely tasting the spicy sauce. Mbangana hums as she prepares bowls of food for the children, and Kouézou guts and salts the fish Masousoule caught. I fall asleep soon after eating, lulled off by the waning light and Mbangana's singing. The next day, when Mbangana wakes me up, I know it is morning, but I still can't see the sun. As we eat, she tells me I'll go with her to the farm that day. I listen to Siguila, Mouibia, and Nyembane chatter as we walk to the farm and join them when they start to work. The congenial way the siblings talk to each other is so different from how it was back in the village with my sisters. As the chief's daughters, we were treated with deference in the village, but among ourselves, it was never this easy. While our mothers

competed for our father's attention and favor, our brothers mostly ignored us. I wonder how things are in the village with me gone. The thoughts linger in my mind as I work. I feel guilty for leaving Little Sister, Moutipi, and Mother behind. I worry about Little Sister. Mother dotes on her now that she is a baby, but when she starts going out with Chichiguane and our other sisters she'll be without protection. My thoughts race and a buzzing sound fills my ears as I remember Chichiguane and my other sister's laughing faces when they stood looking down at me in the clay pit. How they'd walked away, leaving me in the pit, knowing it could collapse and bury me alive. I had to find a way to protect Little Sister. The buzzing in my ears gets louder so I look around. It is coming from some kind of beetle on a leaf near me. As I watch, it lifts its wings and flies away. I turn my attention back to work, deciding not to think about Mother or Little Sister or anyone else in the village. The day gets brighter and brighter as if the sun is rising in the sky, just in a part where we can't see.

"We don't know where the sun is," Mbangana shrugs when I ask her. "But we get enough light and for that we are thankful."

When we stop to rest I find a tree to sit under. I drift off to sleep, exhausted by the previous day's events and the morning of work. I jerk awake when I hear someone call my name and look around confusedly when I realize I am no longer in Chipfalamfula's belly. I am in the bushes near the riverbank. Mother is there too with Little Sister tied to her back. Moutipi is with them, and I hear Mother tearfully begging him to take her to where he left me. Moutipi leads them to the spot from which I jumped into the river. Mother walks over to where he is and shouts my name over and over. I run out of the bushes to her side but when I try to grab her hand, I slide through her as if she is air. "Mother!" I shout.

“Mother, I am here!” I stand in front of her and wave my hands, but she doesn’t hear or see me. She continues calling my name and I watch helplessly as she starts wailing. Moutipi starts to growl. I look in the direction of his gaze and see Chichiguane and my other sisters approaching with their baskets for clay.

“Are you still looking for your daughter?” Chichiguane asks, her voice slippery with malice. “She’s dead, you know.”

“My daughter is not dead.” Mother replies, wiping the tears from her face.

“Maybe my mother is right,” Chichiguane continues, walking over to stand near the place where she and the others had left me to die. The waters have washed away the loose soil but I can still see the hole in the ground. “Maybe the foolish girl has drowned in the river. Is that why you are standing here shouting like a madwoman?” Chichiguane chuckles and the other girls, emboldened by her actions, laugh with her. Moutipi starts to bark. “Or maybe the Makenyi found her,” Chichiguane continues, her eyes wide with feigned concern. “Maybe they have already eaten her!”

The Makenyi are squat, hairy, human-like creatures who hide in their underground homes during the day but roam the forests at night. Groups of Makenyi have been known to capture adult men who are never seen again. They also love to collect shiny, gold jewelry and bright beads, such as the girls and women in our village wear.

When Mother shakes her head and starts wailing again. The group of girls laugh and walk toward another clay pit. I turn my attention back to Mother when Chichiguane shoves Nabandji, one of our other sisters, toward the pit.

She has sunk to the ground, still wailing, calling my name, and begging me to come back. Little Sister starts crying too. Shaking with anger, I kneel near Mother and try to wrap my arms around her, but my arms slide through her.

“Mother, don’t cry, I am here!” I plead. “The Makenyi haven’t eaten me. Chipfalamfula swallowed me. I am safe with Masousoule, Father’s granduncle. I live with him and his family.”

Mother doesn’t hear me no matter how loudly I speak. I sit on the ground next to her and close my eyes, trying to think of a way to communicate with her. I hear a buzzing sound again and open my eyes. I am back under the tree in Chipfalamfula’s belly, and I can feel her presence, a subtle, questioning pressure on my mind. Something crawls on my arm, and I absentmindedly brush it off. The beetle I saw earlier flies up and lingers in front of my face. It is so close I can see its small eyes.

“Come, Chiguyane!” Mbangana calls out. “We are going back to work.”

The beetle flies away as I rise to my feet. “What kind of beetle is that?” I ask, pointing at it. She glances over and shakes her head.

“I don’t know. Some creatures down here are different from the ones above.”

The sound of Mother and Little Sister’s crying and Chipfalamfula’s questioning presence linger in my mind for the rest of the day so I am tired and upset when we go back home. I barely touch the fish Masousoule has cooked for us. He watches me for a few minutes then comes over to sit with me.

“What happened?” he asks gently. I tell him about the beetle and the strange vision.” If you ask,” he says after a long pause. “Chipfalamfula will let you go to them. But if you want to stay here, then it is best if you don’t. The less you remember about what is up there, the better. You’ll continue to see the people you love, especially if they are thinking about you, or if they are sad or in pain. But if you persevere, you’ll soon forget them and be happy here.”

I let his words sink in, understanding Chipfalamfula’s village a little better. As much as I miss Little Sister, Moutipi,

and Mother, I don't want to go back to the village and live with Chichiguane and the others.

"Can I ask them to come here?" I ask hopefully. Masousoule smiles sadly.

"You can. But they'll only survive the journey down if they really want to come here."

I remember how water flooded my nose and mouth when I thought about Mother and Little Sister during my journey into Chipfalamfula's belly. My hope dissipates like mist in the hot glare of the sun. Mother will never give up her place as the chief's favorite wife and Little Sister is too young to decide.

"Come," Masousoule says. "Let me show you something!" I follow him out of the hut. We walk through the quiet village toward the lake. Masousoule guides me to the water's edge. "Can you swim?" he asks with a twinkle in his eye. I nod. "Come with me then." He holds out his hand and when I take it, he pulls me into the water and starts to run. We run deeper into the lake, our steps wobbly as we move against the water. When we are waist deep, Masousoule lets go of my hand and dives into the lake. I take a deep breath to do the same and release it in a shocked huff when I see a fishtail where I expected Masousoule's legs to be. He surfaces a short distance away from me and laughs. "Look at your legs, Chiguyane! Where are they?"

I look down and cry out. Instead of legs, I have a fish tail. Masousoule laughs again.

"You are a child of the Big Fish, don't you see?" he calls out. "Here in Ndhawu you are free! Your life can be anything you want it to be! Here, we are one family!"

I look up at him in wonder. Still laughing, he dives under the water. I dive in too and then laugh, air bubbling out of my mouth, when I realize that I don't need to breathe.

I try not to think of Mother or Little Sister again and immerse myself in my new life. I find out more about the village which the people call Ndhawu Ya Hina Ya Ntsako—Our Place of Happiness. No new children are born here, but occasionally, babies and other young children arrive at the entrance. Nobody wonders how they got there, preferring not to speculate about whatever horrors they might've escaped. They are taken into the community and loved. There is no chief in Ndhawu. Some people live alone and some people come together to form households. There are all kinds of households in Ndhawu. There are households with no parents, just groups of young people living happily together. There are households with two women and their children, and others with two men and their children. There are households with only people who are too old to work. They smoke their pipes and talk all day, and people bring them food to eat and their problems to solve. There are households like the ones we left behind, with a man, his wives, and their children. There are some, like ours, with a woman, her husbands, and their children. Masousoule shares a hut with Mbangana but some nights, he goes to Kouézou's hut. Other times, Mbangana goes to Kouézou. Some mornings, all three of them emerge from Kouézou's hut. Back in the village, I know people have their ways, but they do things discreetly. In Ndhawu no one cares.

"We have found our place of happiness," Mbangana says cryptically when I ask her about it. "Maybe you'll find yours too!" she adds with a sly look and a laugh. I don't press for more details. Everyone in Ndhawu seems content with their lives. People are gentle and kind to each other. Nobody quarrels or fights. It seems as if we all realize that

with Chipfalamfula's help, we have an opportunity to live in a different world than the one we left behind with its sorrows and unnecessary cruelties. Speaking of Chipfalamfula, we don't ever hear from her, but we don't need to. She's always present, an awareness in all of our minds, and in everything that surrounds us. We work, we play in the water, we eat, and we rest. It is a bewilderingly comforting rhythm of life that makes me realize how wrong things are back in my village. I sink into its soft embrace, losing track of days as I flow with my new family's routines so I am startled one day when my mind suddenly wanders to Little Sister.

It happens as I sit under a tree weaving a basket for Mbangana to carry fruit to the market where people exchange what they have for what they need. I wonder how big she has gotten since I last saw her. I know I have grown because Mbangana gave me new clothes to replace the ones I'd been wearing since I arrived in Ndhawu. As I think about Little Sister, I hear a buzzing sound. When I look up from the basket and see the strange beetle flying toward me. I brush it away, but it keeps returning. Finally, I let it land on my arm.

"What do you want?" I whisper. It starts to buzz, making a low, hypnotizing sound. As I listen, a deep exhaustion overcomes me and I fall asleep. When I awaken, I am back in the village, but this time I am at the spring where the girls come to carry water. I look around expecting to see them but there is no one. I suspect they will come, so I hide in the bushes and wait. I am correct. I hear voices singing a song. I can't make out the words at first but as they come closer the words become clearer:

*We are the sisters who carry jugs on our heads!  
The ones who killed their sister, where did they do it?  
In the swamp where the long grass is!*

I recoil in horror when I hear the song and realize who is coming. The group comes around the bend in the path, walking past my tree. There is Chichiguane, walking in front as always. Behind her are Titichane and Saboulana, her sisters. They follow her everywhere, picking up her cruelty when she drops it. I watch my other sisters pass by, singing about how they killed me. Disgusted, I turn to leave, but my breath staggers in my chest when I see the last person to come around the bend. Little Sister! She looks just like Mother and seems to be about my age when I jumped into the river. Have I been in Chipfalamfula's belly for that long? She walks slowly, weighed down by her clay pot which looks bigger than the ones girls her age carry. She won't be able to carry it back to the village when it is filled with water. I see the haunted look in her eyes and my heart breaks for her. I know why it is there. The group of girls reach the spring and the other girls go about filling their pots with water. When Little Sister joins them, they ignore her. She sits alone as the girls help each other lift the pots onto their heads and leave the spring.

"You have to let me help her!" I say to Chipfalamfula. The world starts to spin around me as soon as I speak. Panicking, I close my eyes, thinking I am returning to Ndhawu. "Please, let me help her!" I say again. The world stops spinning, and when I open my eyes I am on the riverbank with the sun shining overhead. I run to Little Sister. When I find her, she is still sitting where the others left her, crying. She looks up at my approach, startled, but her eyes don't light up in recognition. My heart squeezes painfully in my chest.

"Who are you?" she asks, wiping the tears off her face and standing.

"You don't know me?" I ask. Little Sister shakes her head slowly. Sadness mingles with disappointment to coat my tongue with stale bitterness.

“That is fine,” I say. “Come, I’ll help you with your pot.” I lift the container to my head and motion for her to follow me. Silently, we walk back to the village. I transfer the pot to her head when we reach the ash heaps outside of the village and she staggers under its weight. “Who gave you this pot to carry?” I ask.

“My mother,” she replies, but her gaze slides away from mine as she speaks.

“If you ever need help, with your pot or anything, just think of my face and ask me to come help you and I’ll come. Have you heard?” I don’t know if it will work but I remember what Masousoule said. “And don’t tell anyone you saw me,” I warn in a whisper. Little Sister nods solemnly. I smile at her and she smiles back.

“Who are you?” she asks again, her eyes roving over my face. I don’t answer. I turn around and run all the way back to the river.

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Little Sister’s water pot keeps getting bigger and bigger and even though I know it is Chichiguane who gives her the pots, I say nothing. She still doesn’t recognize me, and I don’t tell her who I am. As time passes, she starts calling me even when she doesn’t need help. One day, I come to her, but she is alone in the bushes just outside the village. Moutipi is with her. He is old and blind but when I throw my arms around him joyfully, careful not to say his name lest I reveal who I am, he sniffs at me, licks my face, and begins to whine and wag his tail so hard I fear it will break. Masousoule doesn’t approve of my visits to the village. Sometimes, when I return to Ndhawu still dripping wet from my swim through the entrance, I see

him with his boat on the shore. He never says anything to me, but his disapproval weighs on the silence.

One day, we are walking back to the village from the spring when, unexpectedly, Little Sister says to me, “You are my sister, Chiguyane, aren’t you?”

I consider lying but decide not to. When I nod, she smiles the first real smile I’ve ever seen her smile and wraps her arms around me. The sudden movement almost tips me and the heavy water pot over.

“Where have you been?” she cries. “Where did you go? They say the Makenyi caught you and ate you!”

“I live with Chipfalamfula now...” I say. “I live inside her.”

“So the stories are true!” Little Sister exclaims, eyes wide.

“How did you find out who I am?” I ask.

“You look so much like Father...” she murmurs. “At first, I thought you were a ghost. Then I thought I was going mad. But you always come when I call. And that time I brought Moutipi, you knew him, and he recognized you.”

I smile, remembering the time she’d brought my dog along. The poor animal is dead now. “I told you I’ll always come. I know what living with Chichiguane is like.”

She grimaces when I say Chichiguane’s name. “She is so wicked! I hate her!”

“I hate her too. The song you were singing the first time I came to you is about me. She and the others tried to kill me.” Little Sister stops walking, so I stop too and turn toward her.

She looks crestfallen.

“She makes us sing the song every time we leave the village. If you don’t sing...” her voice trails off.

“Don’t worry,” I assure her. “I know how she is. Nobody says anything to her because she is the eldest.”

“I wish she would marry and go away, but nobody wants to marry her because she is so wicked.”

I'm not surprised to hear that Chichiguane is still unmarried. Normal people don't bring a poisonous snake into their home, no matter how beautiful its skin markings are. But if Little Sister is as old as she is now, it means Chichiguane is well past marrying age. I shudder thinking about how bitter Chichiguane would be, and who suffers as a result.

"You can come with me to where I live, you know. It is peaceful and everybody is good and kind."

I watch her consider the idea, and shake her head no. "I can't leave Mother here alone. One day, she'll no longer be the favorite."

I'm not prepared for the stab of disappointment and guilt I feel but I know Little Sister is right. Losing another child would be hard on Mother. I wonder why she hasn't borne more children and, as if reading my thoughts, Little Sister answers the question for me.

"She's tried so hard to have more children, but she can't. I heard her talking with the n'anga. Her womb rejects children and none of the sacrifices have worked. We think Father will marry a new woman soon."

I nod sadly.

"I hope I marry soon," Little Sister continues. "I hope I marry a rich man from another village so I can go away from here."

"I hope so for you too, Little Sister," I reply. "I really hope so."

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I know something is wrong the next time Little Sister calls for my help. She is restless and she won't meet my gaze. After we fill the water pot and she helps me lift it onto my head, I start to walk toward the village, but Little Sister doesn't join me.

“Are you coming?” I ask, turning back toward her. The stricken look on her face sends a trill of alarm coursing through my body. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m so sorry!” she says, her eyes filling with tears.

“What are you sorry about?” I ask. “What have you done?” Before she can answer, hands grab me and spin me around.

I flounder, trying not to drop the pot of water from my head.

“Oh, Chigu! My daughter! You’re alive! Where have you been? We’ve been so worried! We thought you were dead.” I blink, stunned at the sudden turn of events, still trying not to drop the pot. A few wrinkles mar the perfection of her face, but Mother is still beautiful.

“I thought Nama was lying when she told me you help her with the water pots,” she continues, oblivious to my shock. “Of course that evil girl was giving her bigger pots than the ones I give her, making her carry extra water so she can use it! Evil, evil girl! But you’ve come back so we don’t have to worry anymore.”

“Mother...” I can’t even speak.

“Come, come,” Mother urges, steering me forward toward the village. “Let’s go home. Your father will be so happy to see you!”

“No!” I shout louder than I mean to, and the sound echoes in the bush. Mother stops her teary chattering and frowns at me. “No,” I repeat calmly. I set the water pot on the ground and then stand up to face her. “I am not going back to the village with you. I can’t go back to the village with you.”

Mother gapes at me then looks at Little Sister who has come to stand next to her.

“I tried to explain it to you...” Little Sister mutters, lowering her gaze. Mother looks back at me and fury twists her face into an ugly mask.

“You selfish child!” she accuses, her voice shrill with anger. “You abandoned us! You know what it’s like in the homestead and you abandoned us!”

“They tried to kill me, Mother!” I protest. “They almost succeeded too! Chipfalamfula saved me so I am Chipfalamfula’s child now.”

“You are *my* child!” Mother snarls. “I’m not letting you run away again!” She reaches out to grab me, but I step back, turn, and run toward the river.

“Chiguyane!” Mother roars, and I hear footsteps behind me. I don’t look back. I run as fast as I can to the river and wade into it. I don’t stop until I’m chest-deep in the water. When I turn around, Mother is wading toward me, a determined look on her face.

“I can’t go back with you, Mother.” I say again when she reaches me. I take a deep breath, exhale, and call on Chipfalamfula. When I feel my form waver, I know she hears me. I hold Mother’s gaze as my legs morph into a fish tail, then I dive away from her. I resurface further out in the river. Mother is no longer advancing but she is wailing. I wait until she stops wailing.

“I am happy with Chipfalamfula’s people, Mother. We even have family there.”

“You should be here with us, Chigu!” she cries. “You should be with your real family!”

I’m fighting angry tears. I’m angry with Little Sister for betraying me. I’m angry with Mother for being so shortsighted. I’m angry with Masousoule for being right. I know I’ll not come back to help Little Sister after this.

“I can’t stay here. I don’t want to stay here. I’m sorry!”

“Don’t you love us anymore?” Little Sister asks mournfully. She wades into the water to stand next to Mother. “Don’t you miss us even a little bit?”

“I love you both more than anyone in the world!” Tears stream down my face as I speak. “But I want to be happy. I want to live in peace and that is impossible if I stay here.”

Mother begins to wail again and suddenly I can’t bear it anymore. I turn around and dive into the water.

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I can think of nothing else but Mother and Little Sister for the next couple of days. The beetle comes around multiple times, but I swat it away, refusing to let it land on me. I try to lose myself to the peaceful rhythm of life in Ndhawu but my sadness follows me around like Moutipi did when he was a puppy. Masousoule watches me but says nothing. It is Kouézou who finally intervenes.

“You have to decide, you know,” he says to me one day as we sit in the shade of a tree, resting from working all morning. The beetle is back, buzzing anxiously nearby. I’d just swatted it away with more force than usual.

“Decide about what?” I ask testily.

Kouézou’s smile is patient and forgiving. “About your family...” he says. “Now that they know you are alive, they will think of you often.” He holds his hand up and the beetle flies over and settles into his palm. “This beetle is a messenger. It comes because you are thinking about them and they are thinking about you too. It won’t stop coming. Even if you kill it, another one will take its place.”

I sigh, angry and frustrated.

“If you really want to go back,” he says gently, “you can go. There are people who have returned to the land above after living here for some time.”

“There are?” I ask a bit too eagerly. He smiles again, a sad, sad smile which makes my heart sink into my belly. “You returned.”

He nods.

“But you came back here...”

Kouézou nods again. “When I returned, I was happy for some time. My wife had married a new man and taken my daughter to live with him in another village. I had a chance to start afresh. But I remembered how life is here. It is so strange how quickly and easily people forget that all we have is each moment we spend with the people around us. Here in Ndhawu, nobody really cares that I am with Masousoule and Mbangana at the same time. Back there, my parents wanted me to only have wives. I didn’t understand it. There were other men like me. But they wanted me to be something I am not. So I came back and now I can never return.”

“Why is that?” I ask, looking over at him. He is looking at me and holds my gaze steadily as he replies.

“That is the way it is. If you go back up there and stay for a while and then choose to return here, you can never go back again.”

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My return to the village causes an uproar. I arrive just after the evening meal. A group of small children see me first and run to the chief’s homestead. Mother and Little Sister come running back with them. Their shouts draw the attention of other people who pour out of their huts to see what the noise is about. When Mother grabs a mat and spreads it on the ground before me, other people in the village follow suit, shouting and singing joyfully as I walk toward the chief’s hut. I sit next to my father that evening and tell them everything that happened, starting with Chichiguane’s failed attempt to kill me. I don’t think anyone really believes my story, not

even when Mother and Little Sister corroborate my claims. But when I mention Masousoule, and my father's head swings toward me, I know that he believes me. He orders Chichiguane's execution immediately, but I beg him to spare her. Later, Little Sister asks me why I didn't let him kill her so we could all be free.

"I... honestly don't know why," I tell her.

Father calls me to him often, wanting to hear about life in Chipfalamfula's belly. He asks about the people and how they live. I tell him as much as I can, hoping that the peaceful ways of Ndhawu will inspire him to change some things in our village. Chichiguane doesn't like that I have Father's ear. She starts with gossip about how Chipfalamfula didn't take me, but that I left the village in shame because I'd gotten pregnant before khomba, the initiation rites. Nobody pays any attention to her words at first, but Chichiguane is the chief's eldest daughter and a bully with a following. Soon, other women in the homestead and then the village start repeating Chichiguane's lies, adding modifications of their own. I take it all in stride, buoyed by Little Sister's joy and Mother's contentment. We ignore Chichiguane as much as we can but that is not always easy. We have to work with her. On those days, I wish I had let Father kill her. When we go out to gather mopani worms and I make a point to steer Little Sister away from where Chichiguane works, surrounded as always by Titichane and Saboulana and the other girls in her coterie. Still, I can hear them singing the song they now sing when we are away from home.

*She said the fish took her away  
We know the truth, we know!*

*She really had to go away  
We know the truth, we know!*

*With a baby to throw away  
We know the truth, we know!  
Inside the pits where we get clay  
We know the truth, we know*

The last part of their song is enraging because that is how they tried to kill me.

“I hate her so much,” Little Sister mutters one day as we work. I say nothing as I pinch open the tail end of the worm I am holding, squeeze its body, and flick the slimy, green contents of its gut to the ground. I am thinking of Kouézou and what he said to me the last time we talked. *It is so strange how quickly and easily people forget that all we have is each moment we spend with the people around us.* I realize then that I stopped Father from executing Chichiguane because I hoped mercy would change her, or at the very least make her less inclined to be cruel. I scoff at my own naivete. I close my eyes to stop the tears welling in my eyes but snap them back open when a familiar buzzing sound draws near. It is the beetle. I am surprised to see it. Aside from my memories of the people and the clothes Mbangana made for me, I have nothing from my stay in Ndhawu. The beetle files around me but doesn’t try to land on me. I reach out my hand, but it files away out of reach. It lingers for the next few moments, coming close but not touching me. Suddenly, it files away into the bush. I feel the hair on the back of my neck rise and turn around. Chichiguane stands behind me, her lips curled in contempt. Titichane and Saboulana flank her.

“What is that strange creature you are trying to catch?” Chichiguane asks. I ignore her and turn back to the worms on the branch next to me. I should’ve known better.

“Can you not talk anymore?” she sneers, shoving me roughly. Caught off guard, I fall to the ground and Little Sister cries

out. “You have so much to say when you’re distracting Father with silly stories.” Chichiguane looms over me menacingly.

“I have nothing to say to you, Chichiguane,” I stand up to face her. “Kuwa ro tshwuka ri na xivungu endzeni. You are a wicked person inside.”

Her face twists with rage and she rears back to hit me. I close my eyes and brace for the blow, but it never lands. Chichiguane yelps and steps away from me, rubbing her arm vigorously. She looks around in confusion and then yelps again, this time furiously patting at a spot on her back. I watch in astonishment as my beetle crawls up her neck, stings her once more, and then flies toward me.

“Noyi loyi!” Chichiguane cries when she sees the insect land on my arm. “Witch! I saw that thing talking to you earlier! Did you see it too, Sabou?”

“I did!” Saboulana confirms, stepping close to examine the rapidly swelling weal on Chichiguane’s neck.

“Father must hear about this!” Titichane exclaims, stepping close to her sister. She looks at the swellings and then turns to wave the other girls over. “Noyi u swerile! We have caught a witch!”

“You’re the witch here!” Little Sister shouts at her. “You’re the witch, and everybody knows it, but they are afraid of you, so they won’t speak.”

The other girls are running to Chichiguane’s side. The beetle has crawled up to sit on my shoulder and its presence is all the confirmation they need. A flash of knowing settles into my mind. I know Chichiguane will use this incident to create suspicion about me in the village. I could already hear the whispers and see the looks. Suddenly, I realize just how much I miss Ndhawu. The calm predictability of life there. The way I could fully relax in the knowledge that no matter what was happening, no one was actively seeking to harm me or anyone else. In Ndhawu,

surrounded by strangers, I felt safer than I have ever felt in the village, surrounded by my own family. Mother and Little Sister have never known anything different from life in the village with Chichiguane and her cruelty so they can't understand the sense of loss I feel. I love them, but do I love them enough to stay? As if to help answer my question, the beetle buzzes once and then takes off from my shoulder and flies away into the bush. The other girls surround Little Sister and I, shouting their accusations as they herd us back to the village.

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They take us to where Father is sitting with his council. Chichiguane runs forward, crying, and throws herself at Father's feet when we arrive. Titichane and Saboulana go to her side to corroborate her story about how I attacked her with a strange creature. They embellish the story, knowing none of the others will contradict them. I watch Father and the council carefully as they talk. Father seems bored and annoyed by Chichiguane's theatrics, but I see his gaze lingering on her arm and neck. The council members look concerned, frightened even. My presence in the village has been a puzzle for many people. They don't know if they can believe my story or if they can trust what I may have become if I have, indeed, returned from Chipfalamfula's belly. Other people who come back from strange disappearances or claim to have been taken by the spirits in the waters show skills in divination or herbalism. I've shown no such skills, except for my relationship with the strange creature that attacked Chichiguane. I don't have to guess what they are thinking.

"Is this story true?" Father asks me when Chichiguane finishes speaking.

“Yes,” I reply, keeping my gaze on Father. I know there’s no point in trying to contradict Chichiguane.

“But you were going to hit her first, Chichiguane!” Little Sister shouts, stepping forward. Mother pulls her back and hushes her. Even here, even now, she won’t defend me.

“I saw the creature flying around her,” Chichiguane cries piteously. “It looked so strange. I was concerned about her, so I went to drive it away. That is when I saw that she was talking to it. Then it attacked me! Look at my arms! Look at my neck, my back! It hurts so much! I am going to die from this pain!” It’s easy to believe Chichiguane’s story. The beetle’s stings have grown into three large, red-tinged mounds on her body.

Ngeletchane, the n’anga, is examining them, his lips pursed in concentration.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before,” he says to all gathered. “Can you describe the creature, Chichiguane?”

Chichiguane launches into an elaborate description of the beetle. I watch Father as she talks. He is watching Chichiguane. His lips curl in contempt when her voice trembles as she describes the beetle which, by the time she finishes, is bigger and more frightening than anything anyone has ever heard of or seen.

“Is what she is saying true, Chiguyane?” Father asks me again when she finishes talking. I hear it in his encouraging tone. He wants me to deny the accusations. I know he’ll take my side. I also see the hardness in his eyes. I know Chichiguane will die tonight if I do what he wants me to do. Falsely accusing another person of bad sorcery which carries a death sentence, is the worst thing a person could do. For a few minutes, I consider it. With Chichiguane gone, we’ll all know some peace in the homestead. But I know it’ll be a short-lived peace. Her mother and sisters won’t forgive, and no one will forget the incident or everything else that has led

to this point. I know I'll never know peace here with these people. I know I have to leave for good.

"It is true, Father."

My father holds my gaze for a few moments and before he looks away, I see pain flash across his face. My whole being rages at the injustice of the moment.

"Well then," he says after a short pause, "we'll decide the matter tomorrow. I must think about this some more."

Dismissed, we return to our huts. I avoid Mother and Little Sister, refusing the food they bring and curling myself up into a dejected ball in one corner of the hut. Little Sister refuses to leave my side so she is there when I wake up from fitful sleep later that night.

"I have to leave," I whisper to her. "I can't stay here."

"I know," she whispers back. Neither of us talks for some time so the only sounds are Mother's snores and the rain drizzling outside.

"Why did you let her lie?" Little Sister asks fiercely.  
"Father would've protected you."

"And executed her..." I shudder. We've both witnessed executions before. Little Sister starts crying. "Don't cry," I soothe, pulling her into my arms and rocking her gently. "Come with me! We can go live with Chipfalamfula's people. They are kind. We will be fine with them."

"But I don't want to live in a fish's belly, Chigu." Little Sister wails loud enough to make Mother stir in her sleep. We wait in tense silence until we hear her start to snore again. I want to explain to Little Sister that Ndhawu doesn't look like a fish's belly, but is she desperate enough to want another world, another life? Can I risk asking her to attempt the journey to Ndhawu?

"Why can't we just find another village to live in? Ah! If only I had a string! I would go to the sky and rest there!"

I see a shade of Mother in her then. In a new village far away, she'll have a chance to settle in, marry, and live a normal life. That is what she cares about. I would be the one with memories from three different lives haunting me. I don't have a string. I can't go to the sky. But I can go back to the waters. I can go back to Chipfalamfula.

"I am leaving," I say, rising to my feet." You can come with me or you can stay here, but I am leaving tonight." I look around the hut and shake my head in exasperation. There is nothing here I want to take with me. I would remove the clothes I wear, and walk to the river naked if it wasn't so cold outside.

"Wait!" Little Sister whispers when I step outside. I hear her rummaging around the hut and when she emerges, I see that she has draped herself with all her necklaces, bracelets, and other jewelry. "Help me find another village. I can't stay here if you leave."

"What about Mother?" I ask. Little Sister looks miserable for a few moments but her next words surprise me.

"She will always be Father's favorite. That is all she really wants to be. She wants that more than she wants to be a mother."

"Let's go."That is all I can say.

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We walk for two days, going inland from the river-crossed entrance to the sea. We walk by day and find a large tree to climb and sleep in at night to avoid capture by the Makenyi. We walk as fast as we can, hiding in the bushes when we hear other travelers coming. I expect father's warriors to come after

us, but no one comes. My beetle joins us on our third day of walking, and I laugh in relief when I see it. Later that day, a hwati bird flies over us and drops a shell on me. I pick it up to examine it and flush with excitement when I recognize it as a shell from the banks of Ndhawu's lake. Mbangana strings them up to drive birds away from the sorghum on her farm. I know then that Chipfalamfula is watching over me and I feel more confident about our journey's prospects. I tie the shell to a string and hang it around my neck. Night falls and we find a motswiri tree with big, broad branches to climb and sleep in. We stay up late, whispering our plans, confident that the sound of chirping crickets and night birds will mask our voices. The beetle has flown off into the night but I am not worried. I know it will return. Little Sister wants to find the nearest village, convinced that our three days' walk has put us far enough away from our own village. I want to keep going. News travels fast, especially word of bad sorcery. But we are also two young girls traveling alone. We will eventually attract unwanted attention.

We stay in the tree all night and when morning dawns, still and peaceful, we slide down the tree and continue our journey. We walk until heat from the rising sun has chased away the chill of the morning. We stop to eat, hiding in the bushes as we nibble on the fruit and roots we gathered as we walked. When we resume our journey through the seemingly endless forest, I am no longer sure if we are headed away from, or back toward, the village. I realize that we're lost when the forest around us starts to look familiar. Distracted by my worried thoughts, I am unprepared when we walk into a clearing and come face to face with a female Makenyi with a baby strapped to her back. She gasps in fright when she sees us and raises the small axe she holds in her hand. Little Sister's scream cuts through the forest like a machete through grass. I grab her and cover her mouth,

frightened that there might be more Makenyi in the bushes. The creature doesn't move or call out to others. She just stands there, eyes wide, watching us with her axe raised. We wait in terrified silence, our harsh breath the only sound filling our ears. When the Makenyi finally moves, she does something so strange Little Sister and I look at each other in puzzlement: she cocks her head to side as if listening to someone speak, then throws her axe to the ground and beckons at us. Little Sister shakes her head so violently, my hands slide from across her mouth.

"No," she cries, trying to wrest herself from my arms. "We can't do that, Chigu." Her words are loud in the quiet forest. The Makenyi flinches and looks around warily. When nothing happens, she covers her mouth with her hands and shakes her head before beckoning to us again.

"She's trying to help us," I whisper to Little Sister. "Look, she threw away her axe and she's not attacking us. She is trying to help us!"

"Or she will take us to where the others are!" Little Sister hisses. Again, the Makenyi looks around nervously, shakes her head, and covers her mouth.

"She is trying to help us," I say more confidently, taking a step toward the creature. She nods encouragingly and beckons, but Little Sister grabs my hand.

"Chigu," she whimpers. "She will kill us."

"We are lost," I snap, suddenly irritated by her fear. "We will surely die if other Makenyi find us wandering around in the forest."

A loud, buzzing sound overshadows my voice, and we all look up as my beetle returns. It flies around us noisily and then flies over to the Makenyi. The creature crouches as the beetle flies around her. When it lands on her nose, she rises from her crouched position carefully, arms out and eyes crossed as she focuses on the beetle. The beetle doesn't fly off. It ripples

its wings a few times, making the buzzing sound, and then flies back to settle on my shoulder. Relieved, the Makenyi pats her face and body and checks her baby. Then she laughs. The sound chimes through the forest and the gesture transforms her face completely. Suddenly, I see the young woman under the hair and strange coverings. It strikes me then how similar the Makenyi are to us. They are smaller and hairier but that is as far as the differences go. I start to wonder why they hate us so much, but the Makenyi starts chattering. She points at the beetle, waves her hands in the air while making a buzzing sound, and then mimics the beetles stinging. She laughs again and picks up her axe. Little Sister stiffens beside me, but the Makenyi smiles reassuringly at her, hangs the axe on the girdle around her waist, beckons to us again, and walks off into the forest. Little Sister hesitates, but I follow the Makenyi, so Little Sister has no choice but to come with us. We walk as quietly as we can but our efforts are clumsy compared to the near soundless way the creature slips through the forest, sometimes moving so quietly we wouldn't even know she was there if we didn't see her walking in front of us. I want to ask where she is taking us, but I don't know how to. I know she means us no harm, but we need to be moving away from our village not toward it. I make a questioning sound and the Makenyi looks back when she hears my voice. But then her eyes widen, and she cries out before turning around to run, crashing heedlessly through the forest where before, she was careful. We start to run too, knowing there is only one reason a Makenyi would be so afraid. Whistling sounds cut through the air and the Makenyi falls to the ground, screaming. The fall jostles the baby, who starts to cry loudly. I run to the Makenyi's but she gestures for us to keep running, her eyes wild. When I see the arrow sticking out of her back, I grab Little Sister's hand and we run as fast as we can. I don't know

I don't know where we are going but I call to Chipfalamfula, hoping that somehow she sees our plight. When a small hare jumps onto the path in front of us and starts running along, I simply follow it. My heart soars in relief when I see a river in the distance. Chipfalamfula might be close.

"Help us cross!" I scream when we are close to the river's banks. "Chipfalamfula! Please, help us cross!"

A wind starts to blow. It stirs and whirls the waters of the river and then, as if controlled by a great hand, the waters recede on each side, leaving a wet path across the riverbed. We run across, trying not to step on the fish, snails, crabs, and other creatures the waters have left in their wake. The men keep chasing us, but when they reach the river, they stop on the banks, frightened by the sight of the waters pulled back. A few run onto the riverbed behind us, marveling at the fish they can easily pick up off the ground. Their distraction serves us well because when we are safe on the other side Chipfalamfula lets the water flow, drowning the ones who had started crossing. Terrified, the others run back into the forest. Still trembling from our ordeal but also too afraid to linger around the river, we continue walking for most of that day. By nightfall, it is raining, and we are lost deep in the forest on the other side of the river. Cold, wet, and miserable, we walk until we find a cave. It is warm and dry and there are glass beads necklaces, gold bracelets, headpieces, and many other jeweled items in small piles everywhere. There are also skeletons. Lots of skeletons. Animal and human skeletons.

"We can't stay here," I whisper to Little Sister.

"I know," she whispers back, but she starts walking around the cave gingerly, picking up jewelry. I am too tired to be irritated by her vanity. I close my eyes and ask Chipfalamfula for help. The shell around my neck suddenly glows and I feel a small tug as if I am being pulled.

"Come." I urge Little Sister. "We must go now!"

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We follow the directions of the glowing shell all night. The forest falls deathly quiet around us as we walk, it seems we are accompanied by something feared by all the creatures of the night. We walk for hours, not sure where we are going, but we eventually emerge into a clearing. A short distance away, we see the silhouettes of huts and a group of people. Before we can run and hide, the shell glows brightly, attracting their attention. The people rush toward us, talking excitedly and pointing at the shell around my neck which is still pulsing with light.

“It is just as Sochangana said! The princesses have come!”

They surround us and take us to a hut in their village where food and water await us. Little Sister falls asleep after we eat but I am restless, curious about the fact that the people in this village seemed to be expecting us. I stay up watching the gleaming coals and gently flickering flames of the fire heating up the hut. The beetle settles on my shoulder and doesn’t move. I assume it, too, is tired. Footsteps approach and I hear the guard outside murmur a respectful greeting. I look up from the flames when a new man enters the hut. I know he is a n’anga from how he is dressed. He sits across from me and smiles happily. He looks familiar but I can’t remember where I have seen him before.

“You have something that belongs to me.”

I frown when he speaks but understanding dawns when he inclines his head toward the now innocuous looking shell around my neck.

“That was you?” I ask, stunned. I remove the shell from around my neck and hand it to him.

“In a manner of speaking,” he replies with a laugh. For a moment, I feel like I am looking at a male version of Mbangana.

“You know my grandmother,” the man says.

“Mbangana...?” I breathe, thrilled, grateful, but also completely mystified by the strange turn of events. He doesn’t answer but makes a series of sounds which I recognize as the sound the hwati bird makes. I laugh in delight when I realize what is about to happen. The bird from a couple of days ago flies into the hut and settles on the man’s shoulder.

“I am Sochangana. Godide here listens to the fish for me. The Big One sent a message some days ago so I sent my friends out to guide you here.”

I nod again, thinking of my beetle, the hwati bird, the Makenyi woman, the hare, and the fearsome presence that followed us through the forest.

“She is waiting for you,” Sochangana continues. “I can take you to the river tonight if you want.”

I know who he means and yet I hesitate, my eyes lingering on Little Sister.

“Will she be safe here?” I ask.

“We will take care of her. Chief Mozilla is a good man, and his son is very much like his father. She’ll get everything she wishes for because her sister loves her.”

I heave a sigh of relief when I realize I am free to go home. “You have been very brave, Chiguyane. We, all of us, the Big One’s children, are proud of you.”

I look into Sochangana’s warm, approving eyes and smile back at him.

“Ndzi khense ngopfu, Malume, thank you.”

“Tana,” he says, leading me out of the hut. “Let us go.”

*The End.*



# The Spirit of The Tree

*Zulu, South Africa*

THEY CHOOSE NOT to linger for too long after the wedding feast but Thembile decides to visit her mother's grave one last time before she leaves with Mlungisi, her husband.

"There's one last thing I must do," she says to him. "Do you want to come with me?"

Mlungisi nods, immediately understanding what she needs to do without her saying more. When they arrive, Thembile kneels at the spot near her mother's grave where the umganu tree had sprouted and grown. She could still see the outline in the grass from where the tree's trunk and branches had lain after her father had cut it down.

"I don't want to leave her," she says, stroking the browned grass. "But I think she is happy I am leaving."

"I think so too," Mlungisi agrees, rubbing her shoulder. "And my homestead is only a few days walk away. We can come back any time you want."

Joy fills Thembile's heart when Mlungisi speaks. Like the warm, solid weight of his body and the calm deliberateness with which he does everything, his deep baritone is a reassuring wall of support she can lean on without fear of it crumbling.

"I really wish you could have tasted the umganu from the tree," she says wistfully. "They were delicious. I've never eaten anything like that before or since."

"Your mother's love grew them," Mlungisi replies, still rubbing her shoulder. "Her spirit was so strong, she reached back into the realm of the living over and over again to take care of you."

"Yes," Thembile murmurs. "Yes, she did. Or I would've starved to death."

Her father remarried not long after Thembile's mother was buried and luck had certainly not been on his side when he chose his second wife. Nonhlanhla made her dislike of Thembile obvious from the first day she arrived. She found fault with everything Thembile did and punished her for the smallest offense. Nonhlanhla's favorite punishment had been to refuse Thembile food. She insisted Thembile's father cut down the umganu tree when she found out about it. She also uprooted the pumpkin plant that sprouted from the spot where the tree grew, once again depriving Thembile of food. She made Thembile walk the long distance to the river to fetch the water used in the homestead but only gave her one pot for all her needs. When a spring started flowing not far from Thembile's mother's grave, giving her a source of water that was closer to the homestead, Nonhlanhla insisted Thembile's father fill it with sand.

"It's not natural," she'd sniffed. "Who knows what misfortune will come to us if we keep drinking from it?"

*What greater misfortune can come to us after you?* Thembile had asked herself silently. But in a roundabout way, Nonhlanhla lived up to the luck implied by her name because if she hadn't cut down the umganu tree circumstances might not have aligned for Mlungisi to come into Thembile's life. She'd been crying near the felled umganu tree when Mlungisi walked by looking for wood. He'd been solicitous and kind when he realized she'd been crying, insisting she tell him why. After hearing her story, he asked her to marry him.

"You don't have to love me or bear my children," he'd told her earnestly. "But you will have a place to stay on my homestead, food to eat, water to drink, and no one trying to end your life." Thembile accepted his offer, knowing that it was only a matter of time before one of Nonhlanhla's schemes would result in her death. But then her father set the requirement that Mlungisi kill twelve buffalo for the wedding feast. Twelve!

"Why does he hate me?" Thembile had cried to Mlungisi. "I am his child. His own blood. He loved my mother. Before she died, he would always tell her how happy he was that I looked like her and not like him. Why does he treat me this way?"

"Maybe you remind him too much of her," Mlungisi had suggested. "Maybe every time he sees you, he thinks of her and it makes him sad. For some people, it would make them treasure the child even more, but grief can distort even the greatest of loves."

"Did he want me to die instead of her?"

"I don't know, Thembile," Mlungisi said tiredly. "I don't think even he knows what he wants."

Thembile's mother had intervened on her daughter's behalf one last time. When he'd set out to fulfill her father's request, Mlungisi had easily found a herd of buffalo asleep under a tree. He'd shot one, expecting the herd to scatter, but when

they stood up, their movements were slow and languorous. The men from the village gave Mlungisi a new name: Owababulala njengezimpukane. *One who kills them like flies.*

Themobile walks quietly beside Mlungisi when they finally leave the grave but her heart is loud with the sound of hope.

*The End*

# The Alledjenu Princess

*Kordofan Region, Sudan*

1.

THE EMIR'S YOUNGEST son doesn't know this but he belongs to the Alledjenu. My parents, the King and Queen of the Alledjenu who live in the trees and rocks , know his mother. She is a great woman and an Amena, a high priestess of the Alledjenu, descended from a long and respected line of priestesses. Her husband follows the religion of the Prophet and has always insisted she raise their sons as followers of the Prophet. They don't know much about their mother's allegiances or family history beyond the children's stories she told them about the Alledjenu. The emir has no daughters and so the amena has no one to teach what she knows. She remains devout, nonetheless. She makes her

sacrifices, participates in the dances, and attends to the people who come to her for help.

Times are changing, however. More and more people have turned to religions and beliefs from faraway lands, so knowledge about and communion with the Alledjenu and other nature spirits is dying out or mixing with these other religions. This wouldn't be a problem if these religions were respectful of the Alledjenu. But they call us evil spirits and persecute the people who commune with us. We won't cease to exist if we're forgotten. We'll cease to evolve and that is a worse fate than death. It is through humans and their bodies that the Alledjenu experience the world. Out of these experiences come inspiration for all the things that elevate human existence from the drudgery of mere survival. Yet, not all Alledjenu are benevolent or helpful. Some are born of chaos and disorder, and that is all they know. It is a fine line between inspiration and madness. Our relationship with humans must be carefully negotiated and navigated so it remains cooperative. Humans need us as much as we need them, and both sides need people who understand the nature of this relationship, people who can discern which Alledjenu is at work and offer appropriate guidance. That is why my parents and the emir's wife made the deal when her last child, a boy to whom she couldn't transfer high priestesshood, was born. The prince will marry a princess of the Alledjenu and become a priest of the Alledjenu so any daughters or granddaughters in their line would become an amena. That way, we won't be forgotten, and our followers will always be protected by the royal house. I was born after the prince but my father told me about the marriage agreement as soon as I was able to understand. I don't mind. I am willing to do what I need to do to ensure the Alledjenu survive.

I have paid close attention to humans since I found out that I am to marry one. They are interesting creatures. As

children, they are kindhearted and mischievous. But something terrible happens as they grow older and become men and women. The men are taught to cover all their goodness under masks of arrogance and aggression. This makes them hard and cruel. The women are taught vanity and a more subtle kind of aggression which is no less vicious or destructive than the men's. Many people who come to Alledjenu priests and priestesses for help need protection from these aggressions. When they seek the help of benevolent Alledjenu, peace and harmony return. When they seek the chaotic ones, it can take generations to fix the damage done.

The emir's son is not hard or cruel, thankfully. With my father and his mother's help, I have kept a close eye on him. The head of the spear that he's had since he was a young boy learning how to fight comes from us. He thinks he fortuitously found the perfect piece of metal out in the wild but we left it there for him. It connects me to him. As long as he has that spear with him, and he certainly keeps the weapon close, I know where he is, what he is doing, what he is thinking, and how he is feeling. This is how I know he is not disposed to ill will. He is bighearted and playful like a child. He is respectful to his father, brothers, and uncles, and good to his mother, aunts, and cousins. But he has always lived a life of ease and privilege so he is arrogant. This worries me. Also, changing circumstances can reveal different facets of people's characters. I've seen this happen often enough so I know my intended's heart must be tested before he is given access to the power of Alledjenu royalty.

The prince's own playful arrogance gives me the perfect opportunity to test him. I felt a pulse of anxiety from our connection when he picked up his spear this morning so I came into the human realm to investigate. When I see that his father, the emir, is about to test him and his brother's readiness for marriage, I stay to watch. The emir takes them out into

the bushes and asks them to hunt gazelles. The princes do well. They ride skillfully and kill the animals quickly, showing them the mercy and respect a hunter owes his prey. On their way home, the emir asks each of his sons to plunge his spear into the ground in front of the house of the girl he wishes to marry. I already know which girls the prince's brothers will choose but I am curious to see what my betrothed will do. Despite my fondness for him and the bond we share, I don't ever manipulate his emotions. He is free to love another if he wishes, but he has never shown interest in the girls of the village even though they spare no effort to catch his eye.

Just as I suspect, the eldest prince chooses the imam's eldest daughter and the second son chooses the daughter of the wealthiest merchant in the village. The girls are beautiful and the Alledjenu already know of them. The imam's daughter is pious, but I feel sorry for the prince's second brother. The girl is spiteful and spoiled. The emir is pleased with their choices, however, and promises to visit the girls' parents to make the necessary arrangements. After the older sons make their choices, they ride on with their father and brother, the youngest prince, waiting for him to make his choice. The youngest prince canters his horse playfully and twirls his spear in his hand, but he doesn't stick it in the ground as they ride through the village. Soon they are at the other edge of the village, beyond which is only bush and desert.

"What is your intention, son?" the emir asks, impatiently.  
"Have you no desire to marry?"

"Of course, I want to marry," the prince replies with a laugh. "But none of the girls in this village are pretty enough for me. The bush and the desert must provide a beautiful wife for me!" As he speaks, he digs his spurs into his horse's flank. When the animal rears up on its hind legs the prince hefts and throws his spear out into the wild.

His brothers laugh as they watch the spear fly, but the emir and I wear twin expressions of shock at his words. The Alledjenu are always listening. The prince doesn't realize it but he has just acknowledged our betrothal. I feel a tug in my being as the quality of our bond changes. Before his declaration, the iron head of his spear mediated our connection. Now, we are connected to each other directly.

"You're young, my son," the emir says heavily. "Otherwise, you wouldn't play about like this with your weapon or with your words."

"I was just joking, Father!" the prince protests, laughing. "Be that as it may," his father says gravely, "I can't ride out there to settle matters with a woman whose name and family I don't know. You, yourself, my son, will have to ride out in search of your spear and you, yourself, will have to settle the business of your wife."

"But I was just joking, Father!" the prince protests again. He is no longer laughing.

"There is nothing more I can do about it, son." The emir's voice is rough with unexpressed emotion which makes me wonder what he knows of his wife's agreement with the Alledjenu.

"Father," the prince says, spurring his horse toward the emir, but his father turns his horse away and rides off. The two older sons follow their father silently.

I stay with the prince, curious to see what he will do. He stares after his father and brothers until they turn a corner and disappear from sight. He then turns his horse away from the village and, with a muttered curse, rides into the bush.

Seeing my chance, I easily locate the spear and sweep over in the wind to where it is. I carry it further into the bushes and drive it firmly into a tree's trunk. The tree shudders and the tribe of monkeys hidden in its upper branches shriek and swing away into nearby trees. Suddenly, I have an idea. When

the prince arrives at the tree a long time later, I am sitting on a branch. And I am a monkey.

“So,” he says, smiling wryly and looking up at where I sit in the tree. “You are the bride I have chosen for myself.”

I know he is joking and doesn’t expect me to answer. Feeling a bit peeved at his ignorance and recklessness, I decide to shock him.

“That is so,” I say clearly. He goes still as a rock, his face slack with shock. Several emotions follow: fear, confusion, and finally, resignation.

“You can talk,” he says flatly. He doesn’t seem surprised which I find interesting.

“That, too, is so,” I reply, swinging to a lower branch so I am within his reach. He doesn’t say anything for a long time but when he speaks again, his words surprise me.

“At least you can talk,” he says with a wistful smile. “Even if you can’t cook delicious food or provide carpets, oil for lamps, and a soft bed for my household, you can talk.” He really has no idea who he is talking to but he is taking things remarkably well so I decide to be gracious.

“No, I can’t do all that,” I confirm. “But don’t forget that you yourself chose me for your bride when you asked the bush to pick your wife for you.”

“No, I’ll not forget it,” he says through clenched teeth. “My father won’t want to come out to settle this matter with your people so you must come home with me on my horse.”

He wrenches his spear out of the tree and holds out his arm to me. I can sense through our connection that he is horrified at the thought of marrying a monkey, but he wants to do it because he feels it is the right thing to do. This tells me he is honorable. I tuck that bit of information away as I grab his hand and scamper onto the horse behind him. When we arrive at the village, he takes me to his big, mud-walled house and

shows me a room with an angareb and richly embroidered, colorful cushions.

"This is your room," he says. "The house is yours. Go where you please and use what you need. I must go see my father."

I explore the house after he leaves. No woman lives here but one certainly had a hand in furnishing the house. It is beautifully decorated, even though the mud walls are still mostly bare and the earthen floors don't have enough carpets. I catalog what he needs and ride the winds back to the realm of the Alledjenu to talk with my parents.

## 2.

After I move in, the prince begins to spend most of his time away from the house. When he is home, he is always kind and respectful. He makes sure I have enough to eat and drink, and that I am comfortable. When we do talk to each other, I can sense his wonder and fascination with my ability to talk, but I can also sense his consternation at the prospect of sharing his life with a monkey. Word has spread in the village about what happened and even though the people don't mock him openly, they whisper behind their hands about what a mistake he has made. I can tell it is difficult for him, especially when both his brothers marry and settle into their homes with their new wives. He never takes his frustration out on me, which makes me admire him more. Since he spends so much time away from his house, I don't find out about his decision to not host his father at dinner until the night before the day it is supposed to happen. From my angareb, I hear him come home and go to his room. His angareb creaks when he lays down on it and then I hear soft, muffled sounds. I listen closely, and then frown when I hear a sob. The prince is crying. But why?

I find him stretched out on his angareb, his face in his palms, and yes, he is crying quietly. He doesn't look up when I climb onto the angareb and sit next to him.

"Tell me what is troubling you," I say gently. He remains silent for such a long time I start to think he won't reply, but then he speaks.

"You are a kind creature to be concerned about my sorrow, little monkey girl."

The moniker makes me smile. He's used it before and he doesn't say it mockingly.

"I am very concerned," I say sincerely. "Tell me why you cry. Perhaps it is something that can be smoothed out."

"Nothing can be done about it," he replies, wiping away his tears. He sighs heavily and crosses his arms over his face. "Just as you, a monkey, would be better off with one of your kind, my home would be better off with any human woman even if she is less kind and warmhearted than you."

I can't help a smile at his kind words.

"Listen," I say, "you are the emir's son but you are a human man so you don't know what us monkey girls are like or what we can do. Tell me what troubles you."

I see his lips curve into a smile behind his arms so I wait patiently for him to speak.

"Kind monkey girl," he says. "You became my bride on the same day that my elder brothers chose their wives. Now their wives have furnished their homes and made them comfortable and beautiful. The day before yesterday, my father dined with my eldest brother and his wife. Today, he dined with my other brother and his wife. When I spoke with him, he said he found their homes luxurious and welcoming, and that their wives provided sumptuous meals and refreshing drinks. Tomorrow, I ought to entertain my father. But how can I serve him food between these bare walls and on this earthen floor? Who will cook food or serve drinks?"

"Is that all?" I ask.

"It is enough to make me sad," he replies. I hear no bitterness or self-pity as he talks. Just a profound sadness at his inability to properly entertain his father. My heart swells with love for him but I know this is another chance to test the prince some more.

"Well, nothing could be simpler," I say. "Quick, saddle your horse and take me back to the bush. Out there in the desert,

I know a town with many beautiful women from wealthy families who you can court. Surely, one of them will accept you and with her dowry you will be able to furnish your home to your satisfaction and entertain your father with pride. Believe me, this is the easiest thing to arrange.”

The prince’s hands fall away and hope blooms across his face as he contemplates my words.

“That is very kind of you, monkey girl,” he says when I finish talking. Then, his brow furrows in concern. “But tell me, if I do this what will become of you?”

A tendril of something sweet and warm unfurls within me at his question.

“I would die...” *of a broken heart.* I don’t say the second part aloud but his eyes flare with alarm and his lips flatten into a resolute line.

“You are very thoughtful to want to help me, my monkey girl,” he says. “But I can’t let you die. I won you for my wife by throwing my spear, so you are mine to care for and protect. Go back to your angareb and sleep. I can live without my father’s approval. He doesn’t need to come here to visit.”

I’m not quite sure I believe him but I slide to the floor to leave. When I stand, he reaches out and gently takes hold of my furry hand. I look at him and we stare into each other’s eyes. “Thank you for coming to me and asking about the cause of my sorrow,” he says, his eyes soft with gratitude. “You made it go away with your concern.”

“You are really not going to take me back to the desert and find yourself a beautiful wife with a big dowry?” I can’t keep the wonder out of my voice.

“No, of course not!” he laughs. “You, my sweet monkey girl, are staying right here with me.”

I beam a smile at him and then climb back onto the angareb to sit next to him. “Then, there is something else I have to ask you. Have you ever before heard of a monkey that could talk?”

“No,” the prince responds. “I have only heard of such things in the stories my mother told me when I was a child.”

“Your mother is a wise woman,” I say.

“She is,” the prince nods.

“Now that you have seen such an unusual thing with your own eyes, are you willing to believe that I am able to do other unusual things?”

“Yes,” the prince says slowly, looking at me speculatively. “I believe you are capable of even more unusual things.”

“Good,” I reply with a satisfied smile. “Tomorrow, at midday, go to your father and invite him to come dine with you. He’ll find everything in your home as good as it is in your brothers’ homes.”

Shock, fear, and confusion chase each other across his face but he takes a deep breath and nods. “I’ll do as you say, my monkey girl.”

I already know what I plan to do so I return to my room, climb onto my angareb, and fall asleep. I dream that night, and in my dream, the prince comes into my room and gently strokes my hair. But it is not my monkey pelt he strokes, it is the soft curls of my own hair. I wake up the next morning with the memory of his hands.

### 3.

The meal with his father is successful. So successful, in fact, that the emir invites us all to his house for dinner the next day. The emir's curiosity about me so dilutes the prince's joy from the successful visit, he is brooding when he returns home from seeing his father off. His lack of faith annoys me so much that I make all the beautiful carpets, cushions, and furnishings disappear just as he steps into the house. When I hear him exclaim in surprise, I spirit myself away into the bush. I also cause a windstorm to rage all night, so he spends the night alone in the house with the wind blowing sand through the holes in the walls.

My father is waiting for me when I return to the realm of the Alledjenu.

"You do understand why he is upset, don't you daughter?" He already knows all that has happened. The Alledjenu are always listening.

"I do," I reply testily.

"Then why are you so angry with him?"

"He doesn't trust me."

"He doesn't know you. How can he trust you? You know everything about him. You have watched him from when he was a child and your powers of perception far exceed his. He is at a disadvantage but has shown incredible kindness in the way he has treated you. Does he not deserve your understanding?"

"I suppose he does," I mutter. I know my father is right.

But I want the prince to know that he can trust me to take care of him in all the ways I know how. I want him to have faith in my love for him.

"He can't know what you don't tell him or show him, my child," my father says, his voice gentle. "To him, you are an animal. A special animal, but an animal all the same. Perhaps it is time they all meet the Princess of the Alledjenu?"

"Perhaps it is time, Father," I agree.

"Good. "My father smiles at me. "Make sure you go to the amena before you go to the emir. She will have things to tell you."

I spend the night with my family but I know the prince will come looking for me the next morning. I don't want him to worry so I return to my room before he wakes up. He comes looking for me as soon as day breaks.

"My father was very satisfied when he left yesterday," he says, sitting down near me on my angareb. "I don't know how you did what you did but I thank you with all my heart."

I say nothing. I'm still irritated by his lack of faith. "He wants all three of his sons and their wives to dine with him this evening."

"That's very kind of him," I say.

"What am I to do?" the prince asks.

"I suppose you'll have to go with your wife."

"But which wife will I take with me?" he cries.

My temper flares but I keep it in check, deciding, instead, to test him again. "I already told you what you can do. Take me back to the desert and I'll show you where you can find a more suitable wife."

"But you would die!" he cries again in distress. "I don't want that. I already told you so."

"Then I'll have to go to your father's feast as your wife," I say nonchalantly, picking up my tail and plucking out the bits of grass lodged in the hair. The prince says nothing. His eyes are fixed on my hands and my tail. I know he is imagining me doing this or something equally animal-like at the dinner table.

I put the tail in my mouth and chew on a tuft of hair for good measure and almost laugh when I hear him groan in frustration.

“It’s your choice,” I say when I have removed all the grass from my tail. “You can take me back into the bush and I’ll show you where you can find a beautiful wife—”

“I can’t let you die!” he interrupts, his voice firm.

“—or I’ll go to your father’s feast as myself,” I continue.

“Very well,” he says after a beat of silence. “You’ll have to go alone.”

He stands up from my angareb and leaves the room. A few moments later, I hear him saddle his horse and ride off. Later that day, after sunset and just as the moon begins its ascent into the evening sky, I start my preparations for the feast. In the distance, I can hear the sound of drums and fiddles coming from the emir’s palace as the festivities begin. Humming along to the melodies, I conjure a mirror onto the mud wall of my room. Standing before it, I shrug off my monkey form, peeling it from my body like a second skin. For a few moments, I do nothing but look at my naked body and then slowly, I start to sway and dance to the music I can hear, losing myself to the rhythms. I dance as I rub my skin with jasmine scented oils and braid gold and silver threads into my hair. I don’t hear him return but when my skin tingles, I know that the prince is watching me. I continue dancing as I don a finely spun, creamy white linen shift which I pull from the monkey skin. I dance as I place a gold necklace around my neck and gold rings around my wrists and ankles. I dance as I cover my head and face with a veil. I don’t acknowledge the prince even though I feel his desire pulsing through our connection. He slips into his room when I finish dressing and I continue to act as if I don’t know he has returned. I leave the house and go to the palace for the feast.

## 4.

When I arrive, I go in search of his mother. I find her supervising preparations for the evening's feast from where she sits, stirring couscous in a large pan. She looks toward the entrance when I enter the courtyard and a flash of surprise crosses her face.

"Who are you?" she asks cautiously, rising to her feet.

"I am she who your youngest son chose for a wife," I answer.

"Show me your face," she demands. When I throw back my veil, she examines me closely and smiles warmly, seeming satisfied with what she sees.

"You are welcome, Princess," she says.

"I thank you, Mother."

"How are your parents?" she asks, motioning for me to sit next to her.

"They are well." I sit down and take the ladle she hands me. "My father sends his regards."

The prince's mother nods and smiles as I start stirring the couscous in the pan.

"He is a good king," she says, her eyes soft with some happy memory. I like her even more with each passing moment.

"And an even better father," I say with a smile. Her smile fades when I speak.

"I wish I could say the same of your husband's father. You must be careful around him."

Suddenly, I understand why my father insisted I come to her before I meet the emir. I nod. We work in companionable silence until it is time for dinner. I have an idea before I leave.

"Mother," I ask, "may I have a loaf of bread?"

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I find the emir, his two older sons, and their wives in a richly decorated room with luxurious cushions and soft carpets. The space glows with the golden lights of several oil lamps, and sweet-smelling tendrils of smoke from resins burning in exquisite brass burners curl in the air. I pause just inside the doorway and wait patiently for them to acknowledge me. “Who are you?” the emir asks imperiously from where he sits.

“I am the girl your youngest son chose for a wife,” I say from underneath my veil.

“Come in,” the emir invites, his voice heavy with suppressed disdain. “You don’t need to be veiled. My other sons’ wives are here and they are not veiled. Let us see you. We won’t laugh at you.”

“You are my husband’s father,” I say, letting my veil fall away. “Why would you laugh at me?”

The people in the room stare at me in disbelief “Why would you laugh at me?” I ask again, taking a step toward the emir. “I’m not what you expected. I understand. I assumed a monkey form to find out if your youngest son is as kindhearted as he is handsome. My previous form has been a sore trial to him so I must now return home to comfort him. You see, he refused to give me up even if it meant shame and dishonor to him as your son. For that reason, I’ll be a good wife to him. I’ll give him all that I can, as the daughter of the King and Queen of the Alledjenu.”

The people in the room are still mute with shock. The emir’s eyes rove over my face and body. I feel his gaze like an unwanted touch.

“Please accept this gift of greeting.” I hold up the loaf of bread which has now turned into a glittering, polished diamond. “I must now return to my husband.”

I place the diamond on the table in front of the emir and I leave them sitting there in stunned silence. I don't change my form or raise my veil as I walk through the palace. When I enter the courtyard where the musicians and villagers are gathered, people stare and point as I walk past. Word has spread about the woman who sat and talked with the amena. They know who I am. I send my power ahead of me, calling on the Alledjenu to prepare my home for my arrival. I know the prince is there. I know he'll be confused. I smile as I think of the greeting I have planned for him. I am so ready to love my husband and show him all the beautiful things that are possible.

## 5.

The prince and I enjoy a week of uninterrupted bliss before the first summons comes from his father as I expected it would. When he returns from talking with the messenger, the prince looks perplexed and upset.

“Tell me what troubles you, my husband,” I ask, even though I know what his father has asked, and most importantly, why.

“My father is acting very strange,” he says. “He seems angry with me and has made an impossible demand.”

“Impossible is a relative word around here,” I say, raising an eyebrow. “You must know this by now.”

“Yes,” the prince smiles and nods. “But my father wants me to plant a vine in his garden and make sure that by tomorrow, it is fully grown and has ripe grapes for his guests to eat. He says he’ll execute me if I can’t make this happen. Why would he ask for such a thing? Why would he make such a threat?”

I want to tell him his father’s intentions but I know it is prudent to wait. “Don’t worry about it,” I say to him instead. “Let me speak with my people.”

The Alledjenu of Vines give me a twig cut from a vine plant in our realm. “Tell your husband to plant this in a wet piece of ground and ask his father how many bunches of grapes he wants on the plant. They will grow.”

I take the twig to the prince and relay the spirit’s instructions. The vine grows and bears fruit but this doesn’t stop the emir. The next day, he sends for the prince and demands that he grow watermelons overnight in a patch of sandy, infertile ground near the palace. Once again, the emir threatens to execute his son if his demands are not met. The prince has learned to trust me so he

comes to me with the request. The Alledjenu of Melons tell us what to do and again his father is thwarted. I wait for the prince to piece together why his father is suddenly acting differently toward him but he doesn't yet see it so I continue to wait.

Next, the emir locks his son in a room full of bread and meat overnight, and orders him to finish the food before the next day or, once again, face execution. I actually laugh when I hear this. The Alledjenu can eat a village full of food in the blink of an eye. After this incident, I realize that the emir's demands will continue to escalate and the prince is too loyal to ever consider the possibility of his father's betrayal. So, when the prince returns from his father's most recent summons with the news that the emir has asked that he make a newborn baby walk and talk by the next day, or he will be executed, I call him into our private chambers so we can talk.

"My husband," I say gently, "tell me this: if a man you know possesses something you desire with all your heart, even unto death, if you know he won't give this thing to you even if you begged for it, how would you go about getting this thing from him?"

The prince seems puzzled by my question but he answers honestly.

"You, my wife, are the only thing I desire with all my heart, even unto death. If you belonged to another I would find a way to kill him."

I say nothing in response and wait for him to understand. I know when he does when he suddenly looks horrified. "This is what you must do," I say fiercely. "Tonight, you must assemble everyone in the palace, all the servants, the notables, and your father's advisers. When they have gathered, demand that your father agree to the following terms: if the newborn baby he chooses doesn't walk and talk by tomorrow morning, he can execute you. But if the child walks and talks, he'll have to give

up the emirate and he'll be executed. You must do this because he won't stop until he finds a way to kill you."

The prince looks dejected but he nods in agreement and leaves for the palace. After he leaves, I go to see my parents.

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When I arrive, the prince's mother is present. "How is my son?" she asks.

"He's not happy," I say with a sigh. "But he now knows what he must do."

My father nods his approval.

"He will be a good leader," he says to the amena.

"I know he will," the older woman says, but her voice is sad. "I hope he'll forgive himself what he must do."

"I'll see to it that he does," I promise.

"You have much to learn yet, Daughter," my mother smiles at me softly. "There are limits to the power of the Alledjenu. Some things only a person can work out for themselves."

"But if this person has people who love him," I respond, "people who support him and are true to him, there is little he can't overcome."

The amena's face lights up with pleased surprise. "My son is blessed to have your daughter for his wife," she says to my parents, her voice warm. "Now come, we must plan."

## 6.

A boy child is born in the village that evening. He is brought to the prince's house. I cradle the baby in my arms and, chanting the words my mother and the amena taught me, lay him down on the mat the Alledjenu wove for the purpose of our plan. I cover the baby with a warm blanket and he promptly falls into a deep sleep like I was told he would. The prince and I go to sleep. We are awakened the next morning by a commotion outside our house. The emir has arrived with his entourage. But before we can leave our bed, we hear footsteps running toward the door. We hurry from our rooms and arrive just as the child, who has grown into what looks like a four-year-old boy, flings the door open and confronts the crowd. Surprised shouts erupt from the crowd.

"You...you are the child who was born yesterday!" the emir says, his voice faint.

"Yes," the child replies, loud enough for all the people gathered to hear. "I am the boy who was born yesterday. As you and everyone gathered here can see, I can walk and talk. You have forfeited both your life and your lands."

As the child speaks, the emir falls to his knees, his hands pressed to his chest.

"Father!" the prince cries out and runs to his father's side. He holds the older man as he gasps his last breath.

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The prince becomes the emir after his father is buried. He mourns his father for a long time but his mother and even his brothers rally around him to comfort and encourage him. His brothers don't challenge him. They were both present when their father forfeited his life and emirate to their youngest brother. At first, the people are afraid of me. But soon, they realize that those who are friendly or courteous to me prosper. They reap better harvests. Their animals are more fruitful and their business ventures more successful. I also know which plants to give them for whatever ails them. Slowly and surely, I win the people's respect and trust.

And I love my husband. I love him with all my being. He kisses me every day and says, "Thank you for coming into my life, my precious monkey girl."

*The End.*

# Thakane and The Nanabolele

*Sotho, South Africa*

1.

“I HAVE TAKEN care of you since our parents died,” Thakane looked her brother in the eye as she spoke. “I grind corn to make your porridge and cook the meat you bring back from hunting. I make sure our pots are filled with water so you don’t have to drink from the springs like a wild animal. I make sure we have a home that is safe and comfortable.”

Masilo listened to her talk, his young face solemn and impassive. Behind the bushes where the siblings stood, they could hear other mokolwane and their fathers talking. The boys’ excited whoops and laughter indicated how happy

they were with the clothes, shields, and spears their fathers had brought them. Thakane felt her anger rising as Masilo's attention drifted away from her.

"Look at me, Masilo!" she snapped. "I protect you from Libiko, Makhaola, and all the other people who would do you harm because they don't want you to be chief. I have pleaded your case before the people of Ramasilo, assured them that your youth won't prevent you from being a just and fearless king. You know many of them would readily hand over the chieftaincy to Makhaola and you know why we can't let that happen. I brought you to the mophato when it was time. And now I have brought you karos so you can be loosened from the mophato like the powerful man you are. They are made from the skins of the best cows Aunt Matseliso could find. The garments and the shields are sturdy. I have given you everything you need. Why do you now ask such an impossible thing of me? Do my efforts mean nothing to you? Doesn't it matter to you that our father's name remains in disrepute? Don't you see that you are sending me off to my death? Is that what you want? For me to die?"

Masilo flinched at her words and guilt squeezed Thakane's heart but she said nothing to soften her words. Her brother's demand threatened to unravel the plans they'd been working on since their parents died. Chief Ramasilo and his first wife, their mother Dineo, perished during a raid by the feared Amangwane chief, Mankuane. Their clan was small and not particularly wealthy so Chief Ramasilo had believed they wouldn't be noticed by the larger clans whose struggles for land and cattle had become a storm constantly brewing over the land, randomly striking lightning and destroying communities. His lack of foresight had cost him his life and jeopardized their clan's future. The Amangwane took their cattle and killed many of their people. Those who survived

were captured and forced to join the other clan. Only those who'd escaped by fleeing into the bushes were left. They'd regrouped, determined to continue as a people, but they were divided. Some people believed Chief Ramasilo was correct to stay out of the bigger wars. Others now supported Makhaola, their cousin, born of Libiko, Ramasilo's brother's wife. Urged by his mother, Makhaola intended to seize the chieftaincy and ally himself with a larger clan, even if it meant sending more of their people to fight pointless wars.

Thakane understood why her father had been reluctant to participate in the larger wars. The trouble that raged over their land was a finger in the hand of larger troubles to come. If they acted too precipitously, they risked allying themselves with the wrong people. Maintaining their independence for as long as possible was wise. Chief Ramasilo's error, costly as it was, had given them valuable information. Without land and cattle, the main things the invaders wanted, their people, were now adapted to staying mobile and vigilant. They could keep doing this for as long as necessary, staying away from larger groups and finding temporary places to settle and rest. It would be difficult but it was better than being sent off to be massacred. This way, maybe they would outlast the troubles and migrate to a place where the wars wouldn't reach them. But it all depended on Makhaola not becoming chief, which meant Masilo had to become chief as was rightfully his due as first born son of Chief Ramasilo's first wife. But to become chief, Masilo had to be properly loosened from the mophato and win more supporters by demonstrating his wisdom and courage among the people. He couldn't be loosened without being clad in the karos, the attire of mokolwane, young men who have successfully completed their lebollo la banna, their initiation to manhood.

But Masilo had rejected the cowhide karos she had brought him, asking instead for karos made from nanabolele skin.

Thakane shuddered. Nanabolele were monsters of the deep waters. Large and reptilian, their skin glowed as if infused with moonlight, and their sharp claws could easily cut a grown man in half. Their eyes were glittering orbs that enthralled humans and cattle, luring them into the deep rivers and lakes in which they lived, never to be seen again. The dreadful creatures were especially hard to kill since they stayed in groups. It took many warriors and careful planning to kill one because it would have to be separated from others. Long ago, Kweda, the first chief of their clan, had successfully killed a nanabolele. He made karos from its skin which he gave to his son and heir, Matsimela. It was Matsimela who started the tradition of passing nanabolele skin shoes, hat, clothes, spear, and shield from heir to heir as a sure indicator of rightful chieftaincy. But the Amangwane raiders destroyed the nanabolele karos during the raid. It was one of the contentions of Makhaola and his supporters, that by losing the nanabolele karos, Chief Ramasilo had, through his actions, demonstrated that his line was no longer suited to carry the chieftaincy title. Thakane could understand why Masilo would ask for a nanabolele karos but how could he possibly expect her to bring him one?

“Seripa sa bogobe se kaone go feta go se be le bogobe, Masilo,” she pleaded. “Half a loaf is better than no bread. We can’t fail our father. You know Libiko won’t hesitate to have us killed if we lose the support of those who are loyal to our father. Don’t you see how your demand will simply confirm to them that you are an irresponsible child who doesn’t deserve to be chief, Masi?”

“You don’t understand, Thakane,” Masilo said through clenched teeth. His eyes watered and he brushed the tears away angrily.

“Then help me understand, brother,” Thakane begged. “Why do you ask the impossible? Where am I supposed to find nanabolele skin? Where? Na?”

"The other boys know Makhaola is a tyrant but they also say Father was a coward," Masilo's voice cracked on the insult. "They say their fathers and older brothers believe Father had no valor because he let our people be conquered. They say they'll never follow a chief who doesn't have new nanabolele karos. They say they won't fight for Makhaola either. They say they would rather go off and join other clans than continue to be loyal to a family of cowards and tyrants." Masilo's eyes swelled with tears again and he covered his face with his hands. His thin but tightly muscled body shook as he fought tears.

"We had an argument," he continued. "After they said those things, we had an argument and I swore an oath on our family's honor that we will capture a nanabolele and restore our honor. I had to do it, Thakane. I had to do it for Father and for Mother. I know this is what Father would've done, so I had to do it."

Thakane's head reeled as her brother's words sank in. It was much worse than she thought. The threat Makhaola posed paled in comparison to what would happen if warriors started defecting. Together, even under Makhaola, they had a chance. Split, their clan would certainly die out within a generation.

"I don't want you to die, Thakane," Masilo said, eyes wide. "I'd rather not be chief than send you off to die, but do you understand why I had to do it?" He reached out and held on to her arms, no longer trying to hide his tears. "Please tell me you understand, Thakane. I don't want you to die. I don't know how we will do this but I don't want you to die!"

"Shshshsh..." Thakane soothed, gathering him into her arms. "I understand, Masilo. I would've done the same thing. I understand."

They clung to each other and Thakane let her brother cry. It was unfair what had happened to them. Unfair that Masilo was entering manhood burdened with such problems. But to attempt to capture a nanabolele at any time was a huge undertaking. To attempt to capture one now when their people were weakened and divided was a sure journey toward death. But death was already in the storm raging around them. If Makhaola became chief, he would move to consolidate power which meant her life and Masilo's were already forfeit. If the warriors defected and their people were left defenseless, they would be left to the mercy of the wilds. If they were lucky they would find another clan to join, but even then, their ancestry would trail them. They would always be Chief Ramasilo's children and that could be dangerous.

"What are we going to do, Thakane?" Masilo whispered. "I don't know, Masi," she whispered back. "I don't know."

## 2.

Just as she'd expected, the people who were loyal to her father questioned Masilo's maturity when they heard of the oath he'd taken.

"He is a reckless child!" Mosehle, their paternal cousin said, his fair skin flushed with anger. "A wise king would know his limits!"

"It was by paying too close attention to his limits that our Chief Ramasilo fell," Matseliso, their mother's sister argued. "Masilo is honorably named. A futse monga lebitso. Let us give him a chance to live up to his name."

Thakane winced at the reference to her father's failure but smiled gratefully at her aunt. The older woman's devotion to her sister's children had become Thakane's solace. She doubted she could've accomplished any of the things she had without her aunt's support.

"Kea leboha, rakhali," she whispered.

"Don't thank me yet," Matseliso grumbled. "We still have to think about how we will help your brother fulfill his oath since he can't leave the mophato."

"I am not sacrificing myself for a foolish boy's pride," Mosehle declared.

"No one has asked you to, Mosehle," Thabo, their father's oldest friend and chief adviser, said wearily. "Monna ke tsepe e ntso but hoa utloahala mekhelo ea banna e teng, bao ke ba hotseng sesali. We all know who the remaining men in your family are."

Mosehle shot the older man a dirty look but said nothing in response to the insult. When Ramasilo's first wife, Thakane's

mother, failed to bear a son after birthing Thakane, Chief Ramasilo raised his daughter like a son, teaching her to hunt and fight. It was well known that when the Amangwane attacked, Mosehle had run to hide in the bushes while Thakane joined the warriors to fight off the first wave of attackers, giving more people a chance to escape.

The other people in the room, Matseliso's husband Tlotliso, Mohavi, another one of her father's friends, and Ratsebo, the ngaka, murmured soothingly and the room fell silent as they all pondered the situation.

"I'll go." Thakane's quietly spoken words elicited a groan from everyone in the room.

"Yowheh!" Matseliso cried. "You have done enough for that boy, Thakane. And people would be right to call us cowards if we send you to undertake such a dangerous task."

"That is why I am asking for help," Thakane said. "I know I can't do this alone. I don't want to do this alone. But if we are successful, no one will ever question our family's honor again. Our people will be stronger than before. It will give us the heart we need to face the trying times ahead of us." She looked at each person in the room as she spoke the next words. "If I declare publicly that I want to do this, I'll get no support. But if I have support from enough of you, if you, Thabo, and you, Mohavi, come with me, if you give me your blessing Ratsebo, perhaps we will give more people the confidence to go with us."

"Don't leave me out of it," Tlotliso grumbled. "I may be old but I still know how to hold a spear!"

Thakane choked back a laugh. "Of course, Uncle. I'll feel safer if you come with me."

The room fell silent again as they all pondered the situation.

"It is a wise plan," Ratsebo said, finally. The people in the room heaved a collective sigh of relief after the ngaka spoke.

“The warriors will remember how you fought when the Amangwane came. If they agree to support you, we’ll know for sure that your father’s legacy as a kind and just king is still alive. It will give Masilo the confidence he needs. Morena ke morena ka batho.”

“And if the people don’t support him?” Mosehle asked morosely.

“Then we never had a chance against Makhaola to begin with,” Ratsebo said quietly.

### 3.

Thakane set out to capture a nanabolele two days later. After a group of warriors stepped forward to go with her, more people joined the effort, eager to be part of the plan to restore their clan's pride. Even more people joined them when they realized that they didn't have to support Makhaola's bid for chieftaincy. As expected, Libiko and her son sought to undermine them.

"They are shortsighted and reckless just like their father Ramasilo!" Libiko said to anyone who would listen. "At a time when we should be consolidating our strength and resources, they choose to go on a foolhardy mission which will get them all killed."

Many agreed with her, but many more understood the implications Thakane's success.

"If we capture a nanabolele," some said, "people will think twice before trying to attack us."

"Nanabolele skin is what our chiefs wear, after all!" others said. "Who are we without it?"

And so they rallied to Thakane's cause. Those who couldn't join the expedition brought food: meat from cows, goats and sheep, sweet corn balls, and calabashes of beer. They loaded the supplies on oxen and sent the group on their way with encouragements. The group traveled for many days before reaching the first lake in which nanabolele were known to live. They camped at a distance from the lake and Thakane, accompanied by Tlotliso, Thabo, Mohavi, and Mosehle, who'd decided to come after all, went down to the shore to investigate.

Birds skimmed the water's glimmering surface, occasionally diving for fish. On the shore across from them, they could

see a herd of zebras drinking. The wind whistled through the reeds in harmony with a chorus of crickets and frogs. All around them, the lake bustled with life.

"I don't think the animals would feel so safe around here if the nanabolele lived in this lake," Thakane said, looking around.

"I agree." Thabo smiled approvingly at Thakane. "But we will make sure."

They returned with an ox hind which they left on the lake's shores before retreating to their camp. Thakane and a few other warriors took turns keeping watch all night. The next morning they found bits and pieces of the ox hind and hyena paw prints.

"There are no nanabolele here," Thabo said after examining the ground. "They wouldn't leave any pieces behind for hyenas."

And so the group continued their march, stopping at more lakes and rivers, leaving pieces of oxen as bait. But the nanabolele never came. They sang as they walked along.

*Nanabolele, nanabolele! Our brother won't leave the mophato!*

*Nanabolele!*

*A shield he wants of Nanabolele!*

*Nanabolele!*

*And shoes he wants of Nanabolele!*

*Nanabolele!*

*And clothes he wants of Nanabolele!*

*Nanabolele!*

*A hat he wants of Nanabolele!*

*Nanabolele!*

*A spear he wants of Nanabolele!*

*Nanabolele!*

But the nanabolele never came. Every night, the frogs and crickets sang to them, and every morning they found other

animal prints and ravaged pieces of oxen on the shores of the lakes and riverbanks.

“We will soon run out of supplies,” Mosehle said to

Thakane one morning as they broke camp to continue on their journey. “And there are few remaining rivers or lakes deep enough for nanabolele to live in. If we don’t find them, what shall we do?” To his credit, Mosehle didn’t gloat. He had seen for himself how much hope the prospect of victory had kindled in the hearts of the people.

“I don’t know, Mosehle,” Thakane said honestly. “If we don’t find the nanabolele, then we’ll decide what to do.”

The next river, when they arrived, seemed like the perfect place for nanabolele. It was wide and slow with murky waters that didn’t glimmer in the sun like the other rivers and lakes they’d passed. Reeds grew high and thick on its banks but the people heard neither the call of birds nor the slithering of animals in the grass. An air of such dark foreboding hung around the river that the people instinctively fell silent as they approached it.

“If the nanabolele don’t live here,” Tlotliso said, squinting at the waters, “then they’ve left these lands altogether.”

“Ke’nete!” the others agreed. They camped further away from the river and left pieces of ox and sheep on the banks. That night, no one in the camp slept. They were all unnerved by the blanket of silence that settled around the lake at sunset. The next morning, they found the pieces of oxen and sheep on the banks, untouched.

“I don’t know what to make of this,” Thabo said from where he stooped to examine the meat.

“Maybe what we left is not big enough as bait,” Thakane said. And so that night, they killed a pack of oxen and left them on the banks. The next morning they found the oxen, again untouched, where they’d left them. They walked the

length of the bank looking for any signs of the nanabolele but found nothing. Mosehle pulled Thakane aside when they returned.

"I don't have an answer for you, Mosehle," she said tiredly.

"No, no," Mosehle said urgently, "I thought of something. What if we are using the wrong kind of bait? Nanabolele eat wild animals but there are none around here so they must have already eaten everything in the vicinity. They also love cattle, oxen, goats, and sheep, but we know that above all, nanabolele love human flesh. There is not a human community anywhere near here. What if we bait them with ourselves?"

"If a group of them attack us, we don't stand a chance, Mosehle."

"Do you have another plan?" her cousin asked.

"I don't," Thakane shook her head. "Let us ask the others and see what they think."

"It is a foolish but very brave plan," Thabo said. There was admiration in his eyes when he looked at Mosehle. "I think we should try it."

The younger man flushed with pleasure and winked at Thakane. She smiled back at him.

"Only people who volunteer will stay on the banks with us," Thakane said. "If the nanabolele come as we hope, I don't want us all to be slaughtered."

But they couldn't find a single person who wanted to hide while the others risked their lives.

"We will go together and die together if we must," they said. And so as the sun began to set, the last golden rays fading from the sky, their whole company gathered on the riverbank. They lit bright fires and ate their evening meal. Then, they threw more ox meat in the water and joined Thakane when she began to sing.

*Nanabolele, nanabolele! Our brother won't leave the mophato!*  
*Nanabolele!*  
*A shield he wants of Nanabolele!*  
*Nanabolele!*  
*And shoes he wants of Nanabolele!*  
*Nanabolele!*  
*And clothes he wants of Nanabolele!*  
*Nanabolele!*  
*A hat he wants of Nanabolele!*  
*Nanabolele!*  
*A spear he wants of Nanabolele!*  
*Nanabolele!*

The river's still waters began to churn and swirl. Encouraged by the new development, the people grabbed their weapons and stood ready, singing louder as the waters continued to rise and well over the bank. When a vortex opened in the churning waters and a light rose from its depths, the whole company braced themselves for attack. But it wasn't the nanabolele that emerged. An old woman appeared. She was dressed in old, tattered skins and leaned heavily on her staff. She'd once been tall but age had stooped her over. She walked slowly, carefully picking her way through the still turbulent waters. The people watched, speechless, as she approached. When she eventually reached where they stood at the bank, she surveyed them silently, her eyes resting and lingering on Thakane before moving to everyone else in the group.

"You seek the nanabolele?" she asked finally, her wobbly voice surprisingly clear over the sound of the still-churning waters.

"Yes, we do, Grandmother!" Thakane replied. The old woman's eyes returned to her.

"Come with me then," she said and smiled.

## 4.

When Thakane followed the woman without hesitation, Thabo, Mohavi, Tlotliso, and Mosehle fell in step behind her. The whole company joined them, following the woman into the water. She kept on walking even as the waters climbed to her thighs and then her chest. She kept on walking until she disappeared into the river. Thakane closed her eyes, prayed to her father's spirit for protection, and followed the woman. She held her breath as she sank into the water but blinked her eyes open in surprise when she found breathable air on the other side. She looked around, struggling to comprehend what she was seeing. She'd walked into a village, dry like it was aboveground. There were huts with reed screens and cattle pens. Clay pots and grinding stones sat in yards. She walked further into the village, looking around. The village was big enough it must have once belonged to a mighty people. But there were no signs of life. No men walked around. No women sat around fires behind the reed screens covering the doorways. No children played in the yards. No dogs barked. No cows lowed. No sheep bleated. No hens squawked and no cocks crowed. No birds flew in the grey skies above them or called from the leafless trees around them. The village was cold, empty, and eerily silent.

"Me wheh!" Tlotliso muttered behind Thakane, looking around fearfully as they advanced further into the village. "I have never in my life seen or heard of such a strange place."

"Where are all the people, Grandmother?" Thakane asked. The old woman stopped and turned to look back at the crowd of people behind her.

"Dead," she said. "They are all dead. The nanabolele killed and ate them all, the men, the women, the children, the dogs, cattle, goats, sheep, and chickens. They ate everything!"

Cries of dismay erupted in the group. Thakane examined the old woman who seemed unmoved by the people's distress.

"And you, Grandmother," she asked, "the nanabolele didn't eat you?"

The old woman's gaze returned to Thakane and something sinister flashed in her eyes. Thakane's skin prickled with fear.

"No, Daughter," the woman said with a slight smile. "The nanabolele didn't eat me. All I have is tough skin and old bones, so they kept me to work for them."

When she heard the woman's words Thakane cried out and raised her spear, poised to throw it. All the people in the group who had spears raised theirs, ready to attack the old woman.

"Put your spears down," the woman chuckled, waving her hands dismissively. "If I meant to trap and feed you to the nanabolele, do you think I would've told you I work for them? Besides, you are under the water, in their realm. If this were a trap, your spears are useless."

Her heart pounding with fear, Thakane lowered her spear and the others followed suit. Tlotliso lowered his spear reluctantly, his jaws clenched. The woman threw him an amused glance before turning to continue walking. Thakane fell in step beside her.

"I heard your song," said conversationally. "You dare much for your brother."

"We dare for our brother and for our people, Grandmother," Thakane said. "Nanabolele skin is a sign of our people's bravery and honor. I would see that restored."

The woman stopped and looked over at Thakane. "You are Ramasilo's daughter!" she exclaimed, a delighted smile spreading across her face.

"You knew my father?" Thakane asked in surprise.

"No," the woman said, her smile widening. "But I knew your ancestor, Kweda. The one who first killed a nanabolele."

## 5.

The woman's name was Mosela. She'd been her people's ngaka when they lived, many generations ago.

"I'm old enough to know I should no longer be here," she replied when Tlotliso asked how old she was. "And definitely older than you!" she added with a toothless smile. Tlotliso grinned back at her and tension flowed out of Thakane's body. She realized then just how much she'd needed someone else to show some sign of trust in Mosela.

"The nanabolele have gone away to hunt," Mosela informed them. They were gathered around the small fire she'd built in her hut. "They must have gone in the opposite direction from which you came else you would've run into them."

"We knew they weren't in the lakes and rivers we passed because the animals moved around freely and the hyenas ate the bait we left out," Mosehle said.

"Death follows the nanabolele wherever they go," Mosela agreed.

"How did Kweda kill one?" Thakane asked.

"He used leshoma," Mosela replied. When all the people stared in confusion, she explained. "Nanabolele are nearly hard to kill but sap from the leshoma plant weakens them. With enough leshoma sap in its body, especially if it's from the plant's bulb, a nanabolele would fall into such deep sleep you could walk up to it and cut its head off. Even if they eat an animal that has just eaten leshoma, the plant in the animal's belly will still affect them. Kweda and his people didn't know that, of course. Leshoma was forbidden to them except by the most skilled dingaka. They destroyed all the leshoma plants growing in the wild

and cultivated it themselves. But that meant the nanabolele in the area no longer ate animals that fed on leshoma which would have made some of them slow and weak. They became harder to kill and as a result, their population grew and they needed more food. They started attacking human settlements. Kweda was the third son of a chief. From what he told me, he was a ngaka-chitja in training and a skilled hunter, one of the few who had survived a nanabolele attack. His brother died in one of such attacks. Kweda was determined to find a way to kill the nanabolele. And as fate would've it, it was he who, quite by accident, found out about the effect leshoma has on the creatures."

"How did that happen?" Thabo asked.

"He tried to lure the nanabolele with a pig. They came in a group so he could do nothing. But he noticed that all the nanabolele that ate the pig grew weak. One of them even fell asleep in the forest. The others abandoned it so Kweda was able to creep up and cut off its head. When he brought the creature home and cut it open, he saw the pig's flesh and with it pieces of leshoma bulb that the pig had just eaten. He had his suspicions but he had to get confirmation. The problem was, he couldn't harvest leshoma and his mentor refused to believe or help him. The man was jealous of his student."

Everyone gathered nodded. To kill a nanabolele alone is no small feat.

"So what happened?" Thakane prompted. "What did Kweda do?"

"Kweda had many good qualities but his weakness was his arrogance," Mosela shook her head. "If he'd waited, he would've finished his training and had more freedom. But he overplayed his hand. The first pig he used as bait had eaten discarded pieces of leshoma bulb. He didn't harvest it and feed it to the pig himself, which would've been forbidden. The council of dingaka

warned him not to try anything without their permission. Nanabolele are highly intelligent creatures. One of their own dying was expected. Two and in the same way? They would notice and seek revenge. But Kweda didn't listen. He secretly harvested leshoma bulbs and fed them to another pig that he then used as bait. It worked." Mosela heaved a great sigh and tears filled her eyes. "The nanabolele also noticed that two of their own had died after eating animals near Kweda's village. They may have also seen the nanabolele skins drying in the sun where Kweda hid them in the forest. They attacked a few nights later. All of them, not just a group. All the nanabolele in the area attacked. The people who survived said the nanabolele were like ants on an anthill. When morning came, most of the people were dead. Kweda survived."

"They blamed him," Thakane breathed in dismay.

"And rightfully so," Tlotliso muttered. "Monna o pata sehlotsa, he doesn't make his injury worse with reckless actions."

"When Kweda arrived in our village," Mosela continued, "we welcomed him and his knowledge. But he was tormented by what had happened and that made him careless with his life. That is why he didn't stay with my people for long. That is why my father refused when he asked to marry me." Her eyes met Thakane's and she reached out to stroke the younger woman's cheek gently. "You have his eyes."

"I do?" Thakane asked, her voice soft with wonder.

"You do," Mosela smiled. "Your ancestor must have been a powerful seer indeed because he told me the secret of how to kill nanabolele before he left. He told me I might need it one day."

"How did you end up here alone then?" Tlotliso asked gently.

"The nanabolele attacked our village one night. My people fought back but we were overcome. I hid in a hole in the ground during the attack so I survived. No one else did."

“Why have they not killed you?” Thakane pressed. “Even with being old, you are human.”

“They realized that it was better to wait for prey to come to them than to go hunting all the time. What better to attract sympathetic travelers than a weak, old woman?”

“You helped them willingly?” Mohavi asked, distaste curling his lips.

“What choice did I have?” Mosela asked. “I was weak and alone in the world. I also noticed that when they were around, I felt better. Stronger. They carry some kind of magic. It is how I have stayed alive all this time. Which seems like what the balimo wanted because you wouldn’t know how to kill a nanabolele if I weren’t here.”

## 6.

Mosela informed Thakane and the others that the nanabolele would come back satisfied by their hunt but they would only drink from the water hole in their underwater realm. The group decided that the water hole would be the easiest place to poison the nanabolele with leshoma bulb sap. Thabo, Mosehle, Mohavi, and the rest of their group returned to the surface to find the plant.

"Hurry back," Mosela warned as they left. "The nanabolele have been gone for many days so they'll be back soon. You must be hidden by the time they return."

Mosela was right. She had just enough time to finish covering their hiding place with reeds and place the skins Thakane and the others gave her strategically around the village to disperse their scent before the nanabolele returned. The sound they made was terrifying. Their claws and scales scraped the ground as they walked around. Their skin and eyes glowed with an ethereal light. Their growls and snarls cut through the air. Instead of heading straight for their water, they sniffed the ground around Mosela's hut and spread through the deserted village sniffing the ground as they went. They found the skins Mosela had hidden and shook them in their jaws, ripping them to shreds. Then they surrounded Mosela, growling at her.

"A company of people came through while you were gone," she pleaded, sounding frail, weak. "I tried to make them stay but they moved on quickly when they saw the deserted village." The monsters believed her so they crawled off to the watering hole. The leshoma sap took effect almost immediately. Soon the whole village vibrated with the sound of nanabolele snores.

Thakane and her people crept out of their hiding place when they heard the snoring.

“That is their leader,” Mosela said, pointing at a large nanabolele with claws the size of a child’s arm. “If you kill him you’ll buy yourself some time to escape because they’ll be confused when they wake up and can’t find him.”

The people lifted up the sleeping creature and carried it to the surface. Thakane cut its head off and they skinned it, burned its body, and immediately prepared to leave. Mosela called Thakane aside as the others gathered their belongings. “Take this,” she said, pressing a small, smooth ironstone into Thakane’s hand. “When you leave tonight, don’t stop to rest. Travel through the night and put as much distance as possible between yourselves and this place. The nanabolele will pursue you and they’ll be furious. You’ll know they are coming when you see a red cloud in the sky. Throw this stone on the ground. It will grow into a mountain. You must climb the mountain as it grows. Climb before it gets too high. You will be safe at the top because the nanabolele can’t climb this stone. They will try, and that, coupled with the lingering effects of the leshoma, will tire them. When they are exhausted and fall asleep, come down. The stone will shrink as you descend. Put the stone in your bag when it is small enough and keep going.”

“What will happen to you?..” Thakane asked Mosela.

“I’ll stay here so they don’t immediately suspect anything. They’ll kill me when they realize what has happened but it’ll buy you some more time.”

“Kea leboha, nkhono oa ka,” Thakane said, her eyes filling with grateful tears. “We’ll remember you,” she promised.

“See that you do!” Mosela grinned before adding more seriously: “Kweda was a good man despite his shortcomings. It is my honor to help his people.”

## 7.

The red cloud came at dawn. The people at the rear of their group spotted it first and sounded the alarm. They ran as fast as they could but the cloud rapidly gained on them. Thakane threw the stone on the ground and they all clambered up as it grew and grew until it became a mountain so high it reached the skies. The nanabolele tried to follow them but their claws slipped on the smooth surface of the ironstone. The creatures circled the mountain all morning and well into the afternoon. When they fell into exhausted sleep at sunset, Thakane and her people scampered down the mountain which shrank as they descended, becoming a small pebble again by the time they reached the ground. Thakane put the stone in her bag and they resumed their journey. She selected their fastest runners, Mosehle among them, and sent them ahead with a message to their people to prepare for their return with arrows and spears tipped with leshoma bulb sap. The messengers took off running so they were far ahead by the time Thakane and those who stayed behind saw the red cloud in the sky for the second time. Once again, they scrambled atop the stone mountain and the nanabolele were thwarted. On the fifth morning of their journey, Thakane could see her people's settlement and the ash heap just outside of it. She could also see the crowd of warriors waiting, their spears and arrows ready. This time she didn't throw down the stone. She led her group into the settlement, and they all watched as the red cloud drew nearer and nearer. When the nanabolele came within sight, Mosehle and the other warriors rained arrows and spears on them. The nanabolele that were hit weakened and

fell into a stupor. This confused the other nanabolele. Taking advantage of their disorientation, Thakane's people ran toward the beasts with their dogs, completely overwhelming them with the attack. Surprised by the ferocity of the humans, the nanabolele retreated. By the time the fight was over, Thakane and her people had killed five more nanabolele.

The people celebrated that night. They sang songs of praise to Thakane for her bravery. They sang songs to Kweda, their great ancestor. They hailed Masilo as their rightful king. They praised Thabo, Mohavi, Tlotliso, Mosehle, and everyone who joined the expedition. Even Libiko and Makhaola joined the celebration. For the first time since the Amangwane attack, Ramasilo's people came together as one and sang:

*We are the people who slay the Nanabolele!  
We are the people whose chiefs wear karos of the Nanabolele!  
Their shields? Of Nanabolele! Their shoes?  
Of Nanabolele! Their clothes? Of Nanabolele! Their hats?  
Of Nanabolele! And spears?  
Of Nanabolele!  
Their spears are tied with Nanabolele!*

## 8.

Masilo cried tears of joy when Thakane presented him with his new nanabolele karos. She had the shoes, clothes, hat, shield, and spear specially made by the best craftsman in the settlement.

“You have made me a true chief, my sister,” he said, looking down at his glowing clothes.

“Your vision made you a chief, Masilo!” Thakane responded. “The honor you gave our father and the trust you put in the people made you a chief. Remember: morena ke morena ka batho. The chief is Chief through the people. You reminded us of the brave and honorable people we are. We can fight the nanabolele. We don’t fear anyone.”

*The End.*



# When Mwindo Met Kahindo

*Nyanga, Democratic Republic of Congo*

*The day he left...*

I AM USED to the scattered pleasure-pain of the sores spotting my body and the ache in my joints. So when I feel nothing after I wake up this morning, I panic. I've been infected with yaws for as long as I can remember. The round, hard swellings erupted on my skin when I was a child, barely able to walk. The ulcers came soon after. I heard that when people in the world above get yaws and don't get cured, it deforms them, twisting their faces and joints into unrecognizable mounds. No deformed face or twisted bones for me. Just ulcers on my scalp, my face, and down my neck to the rest of my body. They make painful patterns on my breasts and dot my belly. They speckle my buttocks, making sitting for prolonged periods difficult.

The ones between my thighs turn the simple act of walking into anguish. One day, I stooped to relieve myself and almost fell over from the searing pain as the thin skin of my perineum tore when the ulcers there stretched. My eyes watered as my urine touched the sore, tender skin. I am Kahindo, Goddess of Good Fortune, daughter of Muisa, Lord of the Underworld. But people in my father's kingdom shrink from my touch. Even when they come seeking my blessing, I see their pity in their eyes. At least they've stopped bringing me variously scented pomades, concoctions, and decoctions which they swear will heal me. I used to wonder if the people who prayed to me in the world above knew what I looked like; if they would believe that the answers to their pleas came from one so hideously diseased. I prefer to think of myself as a leopard. My ulcers as its spots: evidence I have survived a fire, something designed to kill me. Sometimes, I made myself a leopard and prowled my father's underworld kingdom in that form. There are, after all, some rewards to being a goddess. Other times, I visited the world above and gave good fortune of another kind. But always, I returned to my body, with its generous folds and painfully mottled skin. That is all over now. He came! My own good fortune came, and it is as I'd dreamed it would be. The ulcers are gone. My hand, when I lift it to check, is as smooth and blemish-free as a newborn baby's skin. There are no aches in my joints. Even the ripe, organic scent of open sores which clung to me is gone. I am reborn. I am free. I sit up in my pallet and look around my hut. He is gone now, probably off performing some ridiculous task for my father. But his presence lingers in the room. Bold, brash, all-consuming. Mwindo. His bag of charms sits in a corner next to the pot in which he'd mixed the medicines he used to heal me. My belly warms as I think of his hands on my skin. He'd been so

gentle when he washed my sores, his face serene in his concentration. I'd honestly not believed his remedy would work but here I am. And then the way he'd held me, this past night, the way he'd moved with me, moved in me. I would gladly follow him to the world above, I realize. We've not talked about it, but a man doesn't come into a woman's body with such surefooted steps and open the door to her soul with such confident hands if he doesn't mean to enter her life and stay, does he?

My heart flutters uncertainly for a few moments and then settles into confidence. I will go with him when he leaves. This land of ashes is no place for a goddess. I know where I will go too. My forays into the world above weren't without reason. I know the lands and I know the people. I know where goddesses are revered and where they are reviled. I know which peoples would welcome me and carry kaku medicine bags in my honor. I know where I can walk among my devotees unseen, allowing only the deserving to catch glimpses of me so they can make figurines for their shrines. I know who will compose songs and dances to honor me and sigh my name at their most sublime moments.

I could make friends with other women, starting with Mwindo's kabuto, his father's sister, Iyangura. She is married to Mukiti the River God. She wouldn't balk at friendship with a goddess, would she? She sounds like a great woman too. Powerful in her own right. Mwindo, mighty as he is, seemed impressed when talked about how Iyangura saved him from his father, Shemwindo's, attempts to drown him when he was a baby.

"Even now," he'd said, showing me the rope he carries with him everywhere, "I only have to shake this rope and she'll pull me back to Tubondo where she waits with my uncles, the iron forging Baniyana."

Hope blooms in my heart as I muse on the possibilities. A new life away from my father's treachery. A new life with a lover, friends, and devotees who would become my children. Maybe some children of my own, one day. My good fortune has come, indeed.

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### *Days earlier...*

For a few days after Shemwindo, Mwindo's father, first arrived, I thought he was the one I'd seen in my dreams. My father and his court circled around him like insects drawn to a fire on a cold, dark night. It made no sense. Shemwindo came to the Lord of Cold Ashes for help and protection. Yet, my father treated him with an oily deference which made me nauseous. At my father's request, I reluctantly cooked ash paste for his guest, slowed down even more by the sores between my fingers. But I was glad for the opportunity to listen in on their conversation as I worked. Shemwindo spoke so disparagingly of his son, I resolved to find the boy and help him. I wasn't even aware of the extent of Shemwindo's callousness then. But I knew that, big chief or not, the man was evil.

"You will be safe here," my father assured him.  
"I hope so, Muisa!" Shemwindo replied. "This boy is determined to kill me, and he has evil powers. That is why I tried to destroy him as soon as he was born."

My father's eyes slid over me as Shemwindo spoke.

"You probably know how I feel," Shemwindo continued, following my father's gaze. "It hurts the heart to have a child with so much power and potential be so... disappointing."

"My tree grew beautiful fruit, but worms made them hideous."

My father's casually cruel words hurt more than the chafed ulcers on my palms. I set my ladle down in the pot of ash paste and kept my gaze lowered as I spoke. "I have found ways to be useful, even if not beautiful. Haven't I father?"

"And you'll continue to be useful, daughter," my father laughed. "Good fortune is helpful. Even better than ntsuka fish."

I fought my rage as both men laughed and left the room as fast as I could after serving Shemwindo his food.

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I started spending more time near the well at the kikoka plant through which people from the world above come to the underworld. I planned to intercept Shemwindo's son if he ever came looking for his father. I'd heard all my father's plans. I knew all the traps he would set for Mwindo. I couldn't let the boy die. When he finally arrived, everything made sense. Mwindo was the man in my dreams. It explained the strange pull I'd felt toward his father. I'd expected a boy. Shemwindo spoke as though he was born not too long ago. But Mwindo was no boy. As he looked around at his surroundings, I hungrily took in his powerful, muscled body, his thick beard, his furrowed brow and his mischievous but kind eyes. When our eyes met, I walked over as fast as I could, oblivious to the waves of pain from the sores between my legs.

"This is my welcome, Mwindo," I embraced him as I spoke.

"Yes," he replied distractedly, gently taking me by the shoulder and setting me away from him. I cringed, remembering my affliction. But revulsion wasn't what I saw on his face. His intense, brown eyes roamed over my body, noting the sores and scars. Then he smiled compassionately, squeezed my shoulders, and started to walk away.

"No... wait!" I cried. "Where are you going?" "To find Muisa, the Lord of the Ashes," he replied, speaking with the calm assurance of someone who had no doubts about the success of his quest. "My father , Shemwindo, is with him. Muisa is protecting him from me. I must find them."

I tucked away my irritation at the seemingly endless capacity for arrogance I'd realized most men have, and with a wry smile, called on my power so Shemwindo's son would know the person to whom he was talking. It was time this man, magically powerful as he supposedly was, understood that the underworld isn't the world above.

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Later that day, I luxuriated in the pleasure of foiling my father's plans as I served Mwindo ash paste in my hut. Just as I'd warned, my father offered Mwindo a stool to sit on, something to drink and food to eat. Traps, every single one of them! The stool, his head. The drink, his urine. The food, his excrement. Mwindo would've died if he accepted any of this poisoned hospitality. Of course, the old crook still refused to tell Mwindo where Shemwindo was hiding so it was deliciously satisfying to see his fear when he walked into my hut and saw me fully cured from the yaws. He opened his mouth to ask how and then snapped it shut, his incredulous gaze roaming over my smooth skin which gleamed with the camwood and castor oil I'd rubbed myself with. His gaze turned calculating when he looked over at Mwindo.

"Mwindo, Mwindo," he crooned. "Eat now and rest well. Tomorrow, as soon as you awaken, you must start a new banana grove for me. I'll show you where. You will clear the plot and plant the banana trees. Then you will prune the banana trees,

prop them up, then bring ripe bananas. You must do all that tomorrow. I'll make sure someone is there to watch you. When you finish, I'll tell you where your father is."

My heart sank with each word my father spoke. Who could plant a banana grove and harvest ripe bananas from it in one day? Mwindo could, as I found out the next day.

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After he successfully planted and harvested bananas from the grove in a single day, my father gave Mwindo even more impossible tasks. He completed them all. The showdown between them continued for days. It drew the attention of deities and creatures in both the underworld and the world above. Even Nkuba, God of Lightning, joined the fray. Fortunately, he took Mwindo's side. He arrived as my father's karemba belt trapped and slowly started suffocating Mwindo in the tree he'd climbed to retrieve a honeycomb at my father's request. My heart fell into my stomach when Nkuba struck the tree with a lightning bolt, but Mwindo emerged unscathed, still carrying the honeycomb. This was supposed to be the final ordeal after which my father would surrender Shemwindo, but when servants went to find him, Shemwindo had disappeared. As we all stood around confused, Kahungu the hawk landed on Mwindo's shoulder and announced loud enough for all present to hear:

"Ntumba the aardvark is hiding Shemwindo," he screeched. "Muisa sent a message telling Shemwindo to run because Mwindo is too strong."

I felt sorry for the aardvark when Nkuba reduced his cave to dust and destroyed all his farms with seven vicious lightning bolts. His wife was always kind to me.

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### *The day he left...*

When I arrive at my father's court this morning he is crumpled in a bloody heap at Mwindo's feet. Mwindo is furious because his father has run to hide with Sheburungu the Creator. I try not to question the Creator's decisions, but I don't understand why he would grant one such as Shemwindo amnesty.

"I'll go after him," Mwindo says.

I might've laughed at someone else for being so presuming, but this is Mwindo. For all his arrogance, he is a miracle worker. I send Kahungu and his friend, Kantori the sparrow, to observe what happens and report to me. When they leave, I sit next to my father's bloody, unconscious form and wait.

Kahungu returns with the news that Sheburungu has challenged Mwindo to a game of wiki. I am not surprised. The gambling game is so popular in the underworld and the world above, I am constantly besieged with requests for good fortune as people play. I help when I can but I have little patience for people willing to gamble their whole harvests on their ability to guess the number of seeds in another person's hand. Kahungu flies away and Kantori arrives with the news that Mwindo has agreed to play. I am enraged, even though one doesn't refuse when Sheburungu makes a demand. I hope Mwindo doesn't ask me for help. I am angry enough to refuse and doom him. He doesn't need my intervention, it turns out. At first, Sheburungu wins every hand, taking away Mwindo's butea-coin and all his goats in the world above. Then Mwindo gambles his people, his uncles, and his aunt, all of whom Sheburungu wins. When Kantori arrives and breathlessly chirps the news that Mwindo has wagered his conga, I sit on the

floor and wail. That buffalo-tailed scepter saved Mwindo's life multiple times during his battles with my father. Is he so intent on revenge he would gamble everything and everyone? A horrible thought occurs to me then. If I am his wife, would he gamble me too? I don't have much time to dwell on the thought. Both Kahungu and Kantori fly back to me, their wings flapping in excited haste. Sheburungu lost the wager on the conga and proceeded to lose everything he'd won from Mwindo. I start to tell the birds to go back and watch the proceedings but after a moment of thought, ask them to find Shemwindo and watch him instead. My suspicions prove correct. The birds catch Shemwindo as he tries to escape from Sheburungu's banana grove where he's been hiding.

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I am glad to see Mwindo return with his father bound in ropes from which he can't escape. But my father is still unconscious. I beg Mwindo to heal him. Muisa is God of the Underworld. If he dies, the place will need a ruler and I have no intention of staying here. I cry out when Mwindo begins to strike my father.

"You attacked me in vain, Muisa," Mwindo crows, landing blow after blow on my father's body. "You tried to be equal to me. To me! I who walked after I was born. I who didn't drink breast milk! I who doesn't eat earthly foods! I whose body is iron-forged by the Baniyana. Muisa, don't you see my greatness? Is that why you attacked me?"

"Mercy, Mwindo," my father slurs as he regains consciousness. "Mercy! How were you born? What medicine enables your power?"

As if he's been waiting for the question, Mwindo, puffs his chest up and recites the story of his birth.

“I wasn’t born in the same way that other children are born. I came out of my mother’s middle finger. I was born speaking and walking. Do you not know, Muisa? Have you not heard that I was thrown into a grave, that they had even put banana stems on me before they buried me, and yet I lived? Do you not know that my father put me into a drum and threw me into the river but I came out of it alive? Have you not heard all these marvelous things, Muisa? Is that why you dared to make a fool of me?”

I watch Mwindo speak, my heart in turmoil. He is the man from my dreams. My good fortune. The one who, with kindness, healed my sores and gave me the chance for a new life. But he is also arrogant, reckless, and vengeful, even if justifiably so. I am no longer so sure I want to follow him to the world above, after all. He finishes his speech and shakes the rope which connects him to his aunt, intending to leave.

“Wait,” my father rasps from the ground. “Take my daughter, Kahindo. Marry her as a token of my respect.”

Mwindo looks at me then and blinks. The expression on his face tells me that he’s just now remembered that I exist. I close my eyes and wait.

“I can’t marry a woman from the underworld,” Mwindo says softly. “I must marry a woman from the world above. I must marry a living woman not a Goddess.”

When I open my eyes, he is gone.

*The End*

# Eternal Love

*Nyasa, Tanzania*

## *Promises*

“I LOVE YOU dearly, my wife. I have loved you from the first day I saw you. I made up my mind that I would marry you that day. I even picked the cattle I would give your father. When I was captured by the Gwangara raiders, I didn’t think of my mother or my father. I didn’t think of my brothers or my sister. It was your name I cried when I realized that they were taking me away. It was your face I saw when they put a hole in my ear. It was your voice that comforted me at night when I burned with fever. The memory of you is what made me strong and gave me hope. When they took my staff and put a spear in my hand, I learned how to fight so that one day I might fight for you. When they took that spear and put a heavy load on my back instead, I told myself that I was learning how to carry the bounty from our farms. My joy was great indeed when I escaped because I knew I was coming home to you.

Imagine my delight when I saw that you hadn't married, that you had waited for me too! I'm happy to be your husband. Even if I die, I'll come back to you, Chimemwe. I'll never leave you."

"My husband," I whisper the words to myself and their sweet aftertaste slides across my tongue, down my throat, and settles into my belly. I feel full. Full of love, full of joy, full of life. I have certainly been blessed with a man like Ukuru. He is everything I hoped for in a husband. He is brave, loyal, hardworking, and completely devoted to me. His time as a captive of the Gwangara raiders has aged him. His once smooth face is lined with the memory of his suffering. I can see the hole in his ear where they branded him and the scars on his skin where he was beaten. I can see the ragged line on his belly from where a spear pierced him during a raid. The Gwangara roam the land around the lake, terrorizing smaller villages, capturing people to sell as slaves at the coast, or forcing them to join their raiding. They'd thought Ukuru dead after a raid and abandoned him with the other bodies they left behind. But he'd only been unconscious. When he regained consciousness and realized he was free, he'd easily found his way home even though wounded. He knew the land around the lake like the back of his hand after spending most of his life before captivity wandering its hills with his herd of cattle. The day he came home was the happiest day of my life. I love him dearly too! I loved him from the first day I saw him. I, too, made up my mind that he was the one I would marry. When I heard he had been captured, I felt like a wafu, a dead person. That is what the Gwangara raiders call the people who haven't yet submitted to them. We're as good as dead, they say. But they are wrong. We live! We love!

"I love you dearly too, my husband," I say to Ukuru. "I have loved you from the first day I saw you. I am happy to be your wife. Even if I die, I will come back to you. I'll never leave you."

### *Death*

Ukuru died in the early hours of the morning, five days after our conversation. His fever started suddenly and quickly burned through his body like wildfire. He refused to send for the healer. He always said he knew his illness came from the evil spirits his captors had put inside him. I stayed by his side, feeding him, bathing his body with cool water, and singing to him. I started to fear when his fever didn't break by the fourth day and he fought me deliriously as I tried to bathe him. I calmed myself with the memory of his inner strength and begged the spirit of his dead mother to fight the Gwangara spirits on his behalf. His sister, Duwa, came with food and medicines. She urged me to rest and took my place at his side. For a day, it looked like he would get better. His skin was still hot and dry but he didn't see his captors when he looked at the people gathered around his pallet. He even recognized me.

"My love," he whispered past dry, cracked lips. "My wife. Remember, the day I die, I'll appear to you. I'll never leave you."

"Don't speak like that, Ukuru," Duwa chided gently. But he smiled and closed his eyes. She returned to her homestead that evening, promising to return the next morning. I kept vigil at Ukuru's side all night, singing to him and begging the spirits. I didn't sleep at all so I was awake when he suddenly opened his eyes and gasped weakly. When I leaned over him to comfort him, he held on to my hand and smiled serenely at me.

"Remember my promise," he said, his eyes glittering with tears. "I'll come back to you. I'll never leave you."

A part of me knew what was happening even as I refused to accept it. Still smiling, Ukuru closed his eyes and I felt all the tension seep out of his body. I knew he was gone but I held on to his hand. When it went from hot to warm, and then to cold, I placed it gently across his belly and stayed kneeling by his side. I stayed there until the sun came up. I stayed there until Duwa returned. I stayed there when she started wailing, alerting people to what had happened.

### *Grief and Hope*

I stay at Ukuru's grave after everyone leaves for the river to cleanse themselves before going back to the homestead to eat together. A goat has already been killed and the food prepared. Before they leave, I ask them not to burn the hut Ukuru and I live in as they normally should after a man dies. I know he will come back to me as he promised. I hope they will heed my request even though tradition demands it. My mother doesn't understand my behavior.

"She has gone mad with grief," I hear her whisper to Duwa and the other women as they walk away from the grave toward the river, downstream from where the men are headed.

"The poor girl," Duwa replies. "I heard Ukuru tell her he will appear to her. But he was delirious at the time. She must believe what he said when the fever took his mind."

I ignore them. They don't know that Ukuru made his promise long before the Gwangara's spirits returned to invade his body. They don't know the depth of love that promise stands on. They don't know the depth of love that kept him alive after the spear that should have killed him pierced his body. They don't know the depth of love that gave him the

strength to return to the village even though he was gravely wounded. They wouldn't understand that he has already defied death once to come back to me. I know what I must do so I stay near Ukuru's grave, singing as I wait. I'd come to watch when his brothers dug the grave and worried about how deep under the ground he would be. When they buried him, they'd also covered him with a mat and lined it with sticks to keep the soil off his body. I wasn't sure how he would get out so I stayed to help if he needed it. My mother comes back to the grave after she bathes in the river.

"Come," she says to me. "Let us go back to the hut and eat. Then you must rest. You've barely had any sleep recently and there are other rites you must finish."

"I'll stay here, Mother," I say. "Ukuru will come back. He promised. Please go to his hut and make sure the people don't burn it down. We'll need a place to stay."

"The dead don't come back to live in huts with the living, Chimwemwe," my mother pleads. "You are exhausted. You will take ill yourself if you continue like this. Please, come home." I shake my head resolutely and stay where I am seated.

She doesn't insist, thankfully. She heaves a great, sad sigh and walks back toward the homesteads.

"Mother," I call out to her. She stops and looks back at me, her face etched with worry. "Please make sure they don't burn down Ukuru's hut. He is coming back. He promised."

She doesn't reply.

## *Joy*

I have never been happier in my life as I am at this moment. I laugh and the sound spills into the room like water from a spring. It ripples out into the night in waves the way ripples course through the waters of the lake. Ukuru

laughs with me, little drops of tears gathered in the crinkles at the side of his eyes. My husband. My love. He came back just as he promised he would. I never doubted him, yet my heart had pounded with fear earlier that evening when I'd felt the ground around his grave shudder under my feet and heard the rumbling sound of shifting earth. His grave split in two and he'd climbed out of it, covered in soil and coughing. The frightened but determined look on his face had softened into a smile of wonder and then joy when he saw me waiting. After a moment's hesitation, I'd flung myself into his arms, crying. He'd held me close, breathing my name and whispering prayers of thanks. We held each other for a long time, and I touched him everywhere I could reach, still not believing that he'd actually returned as he promised. We went to the river and bathed each other in the glow of the setting sun, then walked back to the village as darkness crept in from over the lake.

The village was quiet, most people in their homesteads. It is often so after a sudden death. People stay indoors in case the evil spirit still lingers, looking to claim another victim. I felt relieved when I saw that Ukuru's hut was still standing. When we entered and I saw a bowl of food covered with leaves, I silently thanked my mother for her compassion. We ate from the same bowl and my eyes roved over Ukuru as we ate, still wondering how it was possible that he was here with me when I had seen his cold, lifeless body lowered into the ground not too long ago.

"You still can't believe I came back, can you?" he asked.

"The dead don't come back to live in huts with the living." I repeated my mother's words. Ukuru didn't say anything for a long time. When he spoke, he spoke in a language that sounded familiar but that I didn't understand.

"Ukufa kushiya usizi okungekho olwelaphayo," he said.  
"Uthando lushiya inkumbulo akekho ongantshontsha."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means 'Death leaves a heartache no one can heal; love leaves a memory no one can steal,'" Ukuru explained. "One of my fellow captives was a Zulu man. He was taken on his way to the coast to trade skins for brass rings. His father was a powerful sangoma. That is the mganga for Zulu people. He told me that there are few things that love and longing can't accomplish; even death will obey them if they are strong enough."

I pondered Ukuru's words in silence. I didn't know if I believed him. I'd seen many women yearn and almost die after losing a beloved child. Their love and longing, strong as they were, didn't bring their children back. Did this magic of love and longing only work between lovers? Ukuru was here, alive, wasn't he?

"Do you know what memories of you I carry with me?" he asked, interrupting my thoughts. "What memories breathed life into me when I was in that grave?"

I shook my head.

"Well, the soil smelled a bit like how it smells after you pass air," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "Especially after you drink milk!"

His words were so unexpected, I choked out outraged laughter. "Ukuru!"

"I swear it entered my nose and my spirit said, 'Come now my good man, we can't stay here or we will die in truth!'"

I laughed so hard I almost wet myself

"When the ground started to shake, I thought at first it was the sound of your belly," he continued.

"Ukuru, stop!" I was gasping for breath.

"And when it continued rumbling, I wondered if maybe I was in your belly and I would be coming back as our baby. But then, that smell! That smell!"

I shrieked with laughter and he joined in. We are still laughing when a worried voice cuts through our mirth.

“What are you laughing at in there, Chimwemwe?”  
I hear footsteps coming toward the hut and rush to the door to see who it is. A familiar form moves toward me in the dark.  
“Mother, is that you?” I ask.  
“Yes! It’s me! What are you laughing at? The whole village can hear you! And your husband just died!”  
“No, he’s not dead!” I answer. “He came back just as I told you he would! Come! See! He’s inside!”

### *Love*

The people tell me Ukuru didn’t cry when I died. They say he didn’t utter a word when he helped them pick out the spot where I would be buried, or when he carried my body to the grave and helped my brothers and uncles lower me into the ground. They said he caressed the soil lovingly as he helped them cover my grave but he didn’t cry. They say he stayed by my grave when they left to wash at the river before returning home.

My mother brings two bowls of food later in the evening. When she walks into the homestead and sees us sitting in the doorway of our hut, her steps falter for a pace and then she runs toward us with a happy cry. I meet her halfway across the yard and hold her close as she cries.

*The End*

# Black Bird Medicine

*Ila, Zambia*

IT IS PURE chance that I am looking at Longo when Shamakowa brings her more reeds for the basket she is weaving. The woman's brows furrow in annoyance, her gaze lingering over Shamakowa's belly when the girl bends over to place the reeds in the heap next to her. Naturally, my gaze follows Longo's. Thankfully, the group of boys playing nearby start to fight just then, shouting indignantly as they jostle each other. Nobody hears my surprised exclamation.

"Is that all you were able to find?" Longo snaps at Shamakowa. Her shrill voice is loud enough I can hear it over the cries of the still-fighting children.

"I walked all the way to the bend in the river to find these ones, Mother," Shamakowa mutters. The boys are quieter now, so her voice carries across the yard in which we have all gathered to weave baskets and mats.

"And you couldn't walk further to find more?" Longo sneers. People look their way. Shamakowa cringes at her mother's bitter

tone and shrinks into herself under the increased scrutiny. I wince sympathetically. That disorientation of feeling yourself shrink into less space than your physical body occupies is one I am familiar with, even if for a different reason. Shamakowa's body is still chubby with baby fat, so it is not immediately obvious, but she is pregnant. Shamakowa is also still a mushimbi. She has not yet gone through her rites of passage. And she is betrothed to Lukendo whose mother, Shimbala, sits here with us. I glance surreptitiously at the woman but she is engrossed in her weaving. I return my gaze to Shamakowa. Even if Lukendo is responsible, people will still call the child an abomination. Waimita imfunshi, they will say. It's always struck me as unfair how severely girls are punished when they get pregnant before their rites. The men involved bring cattle and are absolved. The girls are shamed and shunned, the babies left in the bushes to die. Sometimes, the girls with them. I worry about Shamakowa. From the way Longo is behaving, Shamakowa and the baby might meet this terrible fate, which would be unfortunate. I've had my eyes on Shamakowa for a while. She has a good memory and always comes back from the bushes with the big, long reeds. She will make a good apprentice.

Longo continues to berate her daughter and the women gathered return their attention to their work, losing interest in them. Longo is an unhappy woman who takes her frustrations out on her children. We are all familiar with her vicious tongue and quick, sharp hands. I, too, turn my attention back to the mat I am weaving but I continue to listen to Longo's tirade, casting sidelong glances at them as I work. I wonder how come Longo and the other women in their homestead hadn't seen that Shamakowa's menses had come. As is expected of her, Shamakowa would've kept it a secret when she saw blood stain her skins and waited for Longo or other women in her family to discover them so they could start kuzaluka for her.

She's about the right age too so Longo should've been paying attention. Shamakowa is Longo's only daughter, a child she bore with a man who died shortly after Longo conceived. But Longo has another child, a son, with her new husband, Nalubwe. The child, Nalubi, is asleep on a mat near his mother's pile of reeds. His labored breath and sweat-sheened skin tells me the fever that has plagued him the last couple of days has not yet broken. Nalubi is a sickly child with frequent bouts of fever and watery stool. Perhaps Longo, distracted with a sick baby, had forgotten to watch out for her older child? I am lost in thought, wondering what Longo plans to do so Shamakowa's yelp startles me. When I look up from my mat, she is rubbing her rubbing her thigh, tears sheening her eyes.

"Longo... enough! Kalemye kana, aze kakulemye! How do you expect your daughter to respect you when you treat her so carelessly?"

A hush falls over the yard when I speak. Even the little boys pause their game and stare over at us. Malice glinting in her eyes, Longo looks pointedly at my swelling belly before sneering. "Will you tell me how to raise my child, Mwaami? Are you ready for that child you carry?"

A collective gasp heaves the women gathered and several of them breathe Longo's name in dismay. She has gone too far.

"Don't talk like that, Longo." Galassi, who sits closest to Longo, speaks first, her tone heavy with censure even though she places a calming hand on Longo's thigh. "Chenjezha nganga, malwazhi eza bu seka. Remember who we all go to when our children are sick."

Longo has the presence of mind to look ashamed so I smile forgivingly when she casts a remorseful look in my direction.

"Indeed, Galassi," I say, holding her gaze. "And I'll never refuse to help a child. Even when her mother is disrespectful." I know Longo understands because her gaze slips away and I

see the tension drain out of her body. I hope she seeks me out. I know she cares about Shamakowa. I know fear is what makes her angry. She has already lost three children to fevers and we are still not sure Nalubi will live. If Shamakowa is pregnant, that is another baby dead and possibly Shamakowa herself. Anyone would be stressed under those conditions. Longo's carelessly spoken words linger in my mind, nonetheless. I know I am not pregnant. I know I can't conceive children because, despite what we were told as children, I didn't conceive a child as everyone said boys would if they got too familiar with older men. I know everyone in the village talks about my belly when I am not there. I know they wonder about it, especially since my father's belly swelled similarly before he died. But I am a mwaami and a healer. They think I'll find a cure. I know I won't. The healer I learned my craft from confided in me that whatever it is that swells my belly is something that has confounded healers long before even he was born. No one agrees on what the best remedy is, and patients almost always end up dead. I know I don't have much time left. Pain stabs my belly when I walk, and a child haplessly commented on my yellow eyes just a few days go. I know that what swells my belly is a death sentence. I know that it will kill me just as it killed my father.

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I'm relieved when Longo slips into my hut later that evening. A part of me feared she wouldn't come, that shame would make her reluctant to seek my help. I smile happily when I see that she is holding a bowl of mukamu and a calabash of ibwantu. Everyone knows I love sorghum bread and beer.

"Mwaami," she begins, her voice soft but rough with emotion. She approaches where I sit and offers me the food and drink. "Ndalibona kumakosi."

"I know you are sorry, Longo," I reassure her as I accept her gift. "Sit. Tell me what is happening with Shama."

She sits on the floor near my feet and after a pause, bursts into a flood of tears. I let her cry and when she crawls close to bury her face in my lap, I stroke her hair and murmur soothingly. Her thin body shakes violently, and her tears soak my skins. Her wails pierce my heart. She cries for a long time before she lifts her swollen eyes to mine. She says one word. A name.

"Sichianji."

Neither of us say anything for a long time after.

"They will kill her," Longo's voice cracks with dread when she speaks again.

"They won't," I say firmly.

"She is starting to show, Mwaami."

"I know," I reply. "I saw it today. I'd be surprised if other women don't suspect something, and your rough treatment is only calling attention to her. Why didn't you come to me sooner?" I ask. "How did you miss her first kusea?"

"Her skins haven't been stained so I wasn't sure at first, Mwaami!" she protests, guilt pulling her eyes toward the floor. "And Nalubi has been so sick, we haven't been able to think of anything else. I know that's how Sichianji—"

I hold up my hand to stop her. "Don't speak your husband's brother's name in my presence again, Longo."

Shame weighs her head down and for a few moments I regret my harsh tone. But I don't recant my words. Men like Sichianji make me glad my grandmother's spirit had chosen me to be her vessel.

"They will kill her," Longo says again, tears filling her eyes. "It's too much. We haven't done kuzaluka for her. She is betrothed. And now her uncle..." She can't even finish her statement. She starts weeping again.

"They won't do anything to her," I say again, a plan forming in my mind. "They won't because they will never find out. I'll visit you tomorrow to see Nalubi. Make sure Shama is there when I come. Do you understand?"

---

Shamakowa welcomes me to their homestead when I arrive. She smiles shyly but keeps her gaze lowered when I greet her. I follow her to her mother's hut. It is just after the evening meal and the compound is settling down for the night. Nalubwe's other wives, Namunza and Nakadindi, are sitting near the fire in Namuza's hut, talking with Chintu and Nachisanto, Sichianji's wives. They rise to greet me warmly as I pass, and I greet them just as warmly. I am a familiar sight since Longo had a difficult pregnancy and Nalubi is a sickly child. They are good women. I know they are kind to Longo despite her attitude and they are well-liked in the village. Their gazes turn to pity when they look at Shamakowa. I am not sure if it is because they know she is pregnant or if it is because of Longo's harsh treatment. I hope it is the latter. Again, I find myself wondering how they all missed Shamakowa's kusea. Nalubwe is in his hut, drinking ibwantu and talking with his brother, Sichianji. They see me walk past but they don't acknowledge me or come out to greet me. I should be offended by their disrespect but I don't care. Longo is the most recent addition to the family so her hut is newer and located further away from Nalubwe's hut. It's not a very big hut since she only has two children. When we enter, it is overheated from the fiercely burning fire and smells of sweat and sickness. Nalubi is lying listlessly on a mat, his body gaunt in the flickering firelight.

"Mwaami..." Longo murmurs when I enter.

"Longo, how are you?" I ask warmly "How is Nalubi?"

"He ate something this evening," Longo replies, exhaustion weighing her words. "I am glad-Shama, wait. Don't go!" She calls out to Shamakowa who was quietly slipping out of the hut. The girl looks back at her mother with wide frightened eyes. "Stay with us," Longo says and looks to me for help, not sure how to proceed.

"Come and sit with us, Shama," I encourage gently with a smile. The girl lingers near the door, clearly not wanting to come back. Her eyes flit to her mother and Longo sighs again and gestures for the girl to return.

"Come and sit with your brother," she says. "If he wakes up again, he has to eat, and I am too tired to feed him."

Shamakowa walks to her brother's side and sits near the slumbering child. I sit on the ground next to Shamakowa and Nalubi. Longo offers me some ibwantu which I accept gratefully. "Tell me how Nalubi has been," I say.

Longo recites how much the child has been eating, drinking, and sleeping. I am glad to hear the child's appetite is improving but he is not urinating often and that concerns me. I lean over and examine him, pressing on his belly and checking his eyes as my teacher had taught me, then I take out my bones for a divination. It is as I expect it to be.

"Your mother. She is still unhappy with what is happening." Longo nods her understanding.

"Continue with the medicines I have given you," I say, "and wash him often with cool water." Longo nods eagerly as I cast the bones again. After examining them, I look at Shamakowa. "Your musedi is unhappy too, Shama. Your mother tells me you have some pain in your belly? I ask the question casually, not sure how much the girl knows of her own condition. Her eyes widen and dart toward her mother before she lowers them to the floor.

"Yes, Mwaami," she mumbles.

"I see. That can happen sometimes before a girl has her kusea. Bad spirits enter the belly and cause trouble. I have medicine that will remove them." I pull a small bag out of my skins and give it to Longo.

"Mix it with ibwantu and give her some to drink tonight. When you wake up tomorrow, give her the rest and then send her to me so I can examine her. She might need to stay with me all day so don't look for her when you start making baskets. Do you understand?" Longo's eyes are as wide as Shama's. I smile reassuringly. "She will feel some pain, but it will be over soon, and she will be well and safe again."

Longo nods again.

"And if anyone asks where she is, tell them I sent for her so I can teach her some remedies."

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I can tell the medicines are already working when Shamakowa arrives at my homestead the next morning. She walks stiffly and cradles the bowl of mukamu she is carrying close to her belly. Her eyes are bright. Her jaws clenched. A light sheen of sweat covers her skin. I know it is not from the exertion of walking in the humid morning. We say nothing to each other. I guide her gently into my hut and tell her to take off her skins, so they remain unstained. When she is naked, I help her onto my sleeping mats which I have padded with skins to soak up the blood and discharge I know will soon start leaking down her thighs. She rolls over on her side and starts crying when she settles down on the skins.

"This will be very painful, Shama. But you will feel much better after. Have you heard?" Shamakowa starts to nod but

then squeezes her eyes shut, gasps, and shudders as another wave of pain rolls through her. I rub her back gently and murmur reassurances. “It will pass. Just breathe when the pain comes and let it go when it leaves.”

The sun makes steady progress toward its zenith and Shamakowa breathes and cries and bleeds. I sing to her and tell her stories from my childhood. By the time she starts discharging, she has learned how to ride the waves of pain and is no longer crying. I start to clean her, talking to her as I work. I tell her about my childhood, about the diviner who told my parents that my grandmother, who was a great healer, had decided to come back through me. I tell her about my parents’ joy, and then their concern when, as I grew older, I developed no interest in boys’ activities. I tell her about their disappointment when they realized what the diviner’s words actually meant. I tell her how, even though they were proud I was a mwaami with an aptitude for herbalism, my parents still struggled to accept that my body was a man’s but my spirit was a woman’s. I tell her how confused I had been because, even though I felt I was a girl, I could see that the girls my age were different from me. I tell her how I started living with the man who became my teacher. I tell her how he’d become more than my teacher. I tell her how he’d taken advantage of our relationship when I was still a boy. I tell her how afraid I’d been that I would become pregnant and the whole village would know. I tell her how alone, ashamed, and afraid I’d felt for years. I tell her how I’d finally found a way to forgive my teacher and myself I tell her how I’d poisoned his food years later after I caught him with another young boy in the village.

Shamakowa is no longer crying. She still winces as I move her around on the skins, but her tear-streaked faces solemn as she listens to my story. After I place a new layer of skins

under her to catch any residual blood or discharge, she speaks for the first time since she arrives.

“I know there were no bad spirits in my belly, Mwaami. I know we just did kasowe.”

I start to ask her how she knows about ending pregnancies but decide not to. I wait to hear what she will say next.

“I want to know how to do it,” she continues. “I want to be able to help other girls as you have helped me today.”

I am suddenly pleased. She will make an excellent student indeed.

“I’ll teach you,” I tell her. “I’ll teach you everything I know.”

I sit next to Shamakowa and we say nothing to each other for a long time. In the distance we can hear the women gathered to weave baskets and mats talking and laughing.

When they break into song, I start to hum with them and stand up to gather the soiled skins.

“Mwaami,” Shamakowa calls.

“Yes, mwanangu?” I know what she is about to ask but I wait for her to voice it.

“Will you teach me about poisons too?”

I let myself feel the weight of the answer I am about to give. I think of newborn babies in the bush, alone and afraid. I think of Shamakowa’s hands gently caressing her brother’s face. I think of the other girl children in Nalubwe’s homestead and in the village. I let my mind meander to all the girls who came before them, the girls who will come after them. I see their many faces, I hear their many voices. I feel their lives, lived and unlived. Then I answer Shamakowa’s question.

“I’ll teach you everything I know.”

*The End*

# The Runaway Princess

*Mossi-Dagomba, Burkina Faso/Ghana*

1.

*Ten days earlier...*

NAA GBEWAA TOOK his time examining the farm. Row by row, he walked its length and breadth, leaving footsteps in brown soil made slimy by heavy rains and fallen okra pods. With each new row, Yennenga watched her father's face for a reaction, but he remained regal and impassive.

"The baansi don't know what to make of this. They are too used to your successes at all things, great and small."

When he finally spoke, her father's words made Yennenga smile despite herself, but she said nothing in response. "There was that one baansi from Bimbilia," Naa Gbewaa continued. "Did you hear him?" Yennenga murmured her assent. The

singer in question had chanted out a lurid praise song in Yennenga's honor, connecting the slime of okra to more intimate things using such brilliant wordplay his crudeness was quickly forgotten. The King's wives had loved the song, securing the singer a place among the royal baansi.

"You left the whole farm to rot," her father mused, returning her thoughts to the farm around them. "So much food wasted, Yennenga. Why?"

"I'm the one who feels wasted," Yennenga said quietly. "I am the one who feels like okra left on the plant so long it dries and falls to the ground. Season after season, you have denied all men who've come to woo me. Suglo's son is here now. Doesn't he, more than anyone else, deserve to not leave disappointed?"

"Bangbebu is a fine man," Naa Gbewaa responded. "I would be proud to call him son."

"Then why is your decision taking so long, my Lord?"

"Suglo will gain more than my daughter if you marry Bangbebu. He will gain my finest warrior."

"I don't doubt Suglo's loyalty to Pusiga, and I'll always serve the interests of our people."

"I know you will, bia. You have proven yourself beyond doubt so I know you will always serve the interests of Pusiga. And you'll do so by my side."

The ground squelched under the weight of her father's retreating footsteps. Left alone, more okra plants might germinate from the white seeds pressed into the muddy soil, but Yennenga couldn't bring herself to care about the next planting season. Her father's words, uttered so clearly they lingered in the air for a few moments, slid into her mind, taking up all space for thought. She knew he meant them as praise, but she felt herself shrink under the weight of their finality, momentarily stunned by the despairing irony of her situation. She had the

love, respect, and admiration of her people and that was going to cost her more than she'd imagined. It was easier sometimes for Yennenga to be with her father as a soldier and an adviser on his war council than as his daughter. The boundary between those two worlds had been erected with each victory Yennenga won on the battlefield, each new skill she deployed in warfare, each new song the baansi sang of her prowess, each new beat the lansi drummed of her triumphs. She would give all that up just to hear the sound of her own children laughing. Desperate to make him understand this, she hurried after her father.

"What else would the baansi say of me then, my Lord? When they have spoken of my esteemed ancestors and sung of my victories in battle, what else would they say of me?"

"What else would they say than the truth?" Naa Gbewaa responded, continuing to make his way across the ravaged okra farm. "What else would they speak of than of your greatness as my hand raised in victory, the gold tip of my spear, the huntress by whose bow and arrow Pusiga is fed, the stubborn lioness who leads my army, the one with whose tail we tie the kingdom together."

"Wouldn't you also have them say I was a woman, my Lord? That the lioness' tail also tied a family together? That I didn't fail to open my hand when an ancestor sought to take it and cross back to this side?"

Naa Gbewaa's steps faltered.

"What is a bundle of firewood to a rope that can tie a kingdom together?" Yennenga asked softly, hating the pleading she heard in her voice.

"A sword on the battlefield can't be a knife you cut meat for your food with." Naa Gbewaa sounded apologetic, as if he expected Yennenga to simply understand why he refused her the thing she wanted the most. Silence filled the space around them.

“M Ba,” Yennenga pleaded, but her father didn’t turn to look at her, not even when she reached out to touch his arm. “M Ba, Father, I beg you. I have brothers who are more than capable of making Pusiga great. They can extend its boundaries to the edges of the world.”

“And none of them have your head for strategy, skill in battle, and the devotion of their warriors. None of them can love the land without wanting to cut off pieces of it for themselves. You will stay by my side. That is my final decision on the matter.”

“You would dishonor me and insult Bangbebu this way? He has always been loyal to you. His warriors have fought alongside ours. The honor of marrying your daughter would be well deserved.”

“Have I not honored you, Yennenga?” Impatience dripped from Naa Gbewaa’s tone. “You sit where other women kneel. Is that not honor enough for you? Bangbebu will be glad, but he’ll still expect of you what is expected of women.”

Yennenga opened her mouth to protest again but suddenly words failed her. If her father was ready to reject even Bangbebu as a suitor, she would never marry as long as she remained by his side. Her vision blurred with tears as she realized she could no longer expect her father to be reasonable. He wouldn’t know her, this woman who felt like his ambitions had invaded her life and captured her hopes and dreams. The knowledge that she had to leave settled into her bones with the chilling clarity of a cold morning.

## 2.

### *Day of the ambush...*

Malititi watched Yennenga fight, his heart swelling with equal parts pride and fear. She kept her gaze on her opponent, skillfully deflecting his attacks with her assegai, the only weapon she had left. She clutched the wooden shaft of the short spear in both hands and precisely executed her movements, her face a calm, serene mask. She'd certainly earned the nickname Yennenga the Svelte. There was a sinuous grace to the way she fought. A man could forget himself watching her fight and imagining other things. Malititi was counting on that. He'd taken a risk, stepping in front of Yennenga instead of knocking the weapon away when the Mandenka warrior threw his spear at her. The weapon struck him in the chest, wounding him mortally. He could feel his life force dissipating with each passing moment. With him out of the way, the fight would come down to Yennenga and the warrior who were equally matched despite the wound on Yennenga's right arm. His gambit seemed to be working. The warrior's pride was making him overconfident. His lust was making him lazy. Malititi could see it in the halfhearted way the man attacked Yennenga, the playfulness in his parries. He thought he was flirting with a woman. He didn't realize he was poking an angry lioness. Yennenga, for her part, didn't lose focus. Malititi watched her catalog the warrior's weakness just as he'd done, noticing his complacency now that he thought his victory was assured. The man said something to Yennenga which Malititi didn't hear but when a smile curved her lips

and she shifted the assegai to her left hand, Malititi relaxed for the first time since he had left the palace with Yennenga. The warrior was a dead man, and he was the only one who didn't know it.

Even now, with death whispering in his ear, Malititi didn't doubt that helping Yennenga escape was the right thing to do. Naa Gbewaa's greatness as a chief wasn't complemented by adeptness as a father. He played favorites among his children. It was hard to see in Yennenga's case because she easily distinguished herself as a valiant fighter and a brilliant strategist but it was different among her siblings. Zirili, the eldest, was the rightful heir to the Pusiga skin-throne. But Naa Gbewaa preferred his youngest son, Kofugo. Kachugu, the eldest daughter, hid her ambitions well but she too aspired to the skin. The other eleven children: Sitobu, Tohogo, Nnantombo, Salaga, Beemoni, Bugyeligu, Kugnaa, Zantaanilan, Lariwaayo, Nyankpana, and Sanglan knew they had no credible claim to Pusiga's skin but that didn't stop their ambition from trailing them like faithful dogs. Yennenga's brothers were great men and mighty warriors, but their desire to rule was a loose thread that a scheming person could pull to unravel the fabric of Naa Gbewaa's legacy. Their competing ambitions were a source of quiet distress among Naa Gbewaa's advisers who had seen succession squabbles tear other royal families apart. Malititi hoped, for Naa Gbewaa's sake, that his sons chose to start their own lineages rather than claim Pusiga's skin for their own. The chief must have worried too because he meant to keep Yennenga at his side. That was the other open secret at court. It was known that if even Naa Gbewaa's sons failed Pusiga, Yennenga wouldn't. She was loyal to her father and chief. She also loved the people and the land.

But Yennenga, loyal warrior and daughter as she was, also aspired to other things. When asked, she told the warriors who

fought under her command that she called on the ferocity of a lioness protecting her cubs on the battlefield. They believed her without question.. They'd all witnessed her triumphs over champion after champion from other lands. They'd fought by her side to victory after victory. The lansi were particularly animated when they drummed the story of how Yennenga defeated Ebou Kakay, a Mandenka champion. The heavily armored Ebou and his equally heavily armored horse had seemed invincible until Yennenga swung down the side of her horse to hamstring the horse with her sword, and then buried two arrows in the man's neck as the disabled horse fell to the ground. The Mandenka warriors had clearly not forgotten that humiliation. The group they'd just fought had been sent to slaughter them all. But Yennenga couldn't die just yet. She had a life to go to. The life her father had refused her. She'd confided in Malititi that she'd lost her zeal for battle, that she wanted a family of her own.

"They call me a lioness and heap so much praise on my head, it flows down my face like sweat. But what is a lioness without cubs?" She'd asked him this despondently. And who could blame her? She was the chief's daughter. She was beautiful and brave. The baansi called her pool of suitors a quiver which never ran out of arrows. But Naa Gbewaa had refused them all, finding fault with each man. At first, the people agreed with their chief that Yennenga deserved more than an ordinary warrior or prince. But when Naa Gbewaa ignored the obvious message in Yennenga's farm of rotting okra and refused Bangbebu, the son of his most loyal ally and friend, even those who had supported Naa Gbewaa, changed their minds. After Bangbebu left with his disappointment, Dikpong, Naa Gbewaa's namo naa, gathered the court drummers into his sampaa. When the men left the chief drummer's hut with slouched shoulders and restless

eyes, Malititi realized what Dikpong meant to do. In hopes of changing the chief's mind, the baansi would begin alluding to Yennenga's misfortune when they drummed Naa Gbewaa's praise names. Their intentions were good, but Malititi knew this would ravage Yennenga's already hurt feelings. He, who owed Yennenga his life multiple times over, couldn't allow it.

Yennenga's sudden blur of movement and the Mandenka warrior's startled cry brought Malititi's attention back to the present. The fight was over. The warrior looked at the assegai sticking through his heart and lifted shocked eyes to Yennenga before falling to his knees. *She is magnificent*, Malititi thought. Yennenga smiled again and spoke before kicking the warrior, catching him under the chin. The sickening crack of a breaking neck was the last sound Malititi heard before he slipped into unconsciousness.

### 3.

She was covered in dust and crushed leaves, weakened from blood loss, and still stunned by the suddenness of the attack. Her foot ached from kicking the Mandenka warrior, and the gash on her right arm, the result of a blow she'd deflected earlier, screamed pain with every movement. But Yennenga willed herself to stumble to Malititi's prone form. She knew he was dead. She'd known it from the way his body shuddered when the spear struck him. She'd also known why he'd stepped in front of a spear he could have simply knocked away with his staff. He'd sacrificed himself knowing that without him to worry about, she would easily defeat the Mandenka warrior.

Malititi's deep, brown skin had already taken on a gray pallor when she flipped him over, but a beatific smile softened his face. It was no comfort to know that her friend and confidante had died with some peace. She ignored the guilt souring her belly and gathered Malititi close, sobs shaking her body. *Oh Malititi? Why was your faith in me always so complete? Why have you always been so sure of me? Why did my needs always matter so much to you?* She knew the answers to her questions. She'd asked them often and Malititi always said the same thing: "Because you are worth everything, n tizo. You are worth everything. That is why Naawuni made sure we could all see why." *Not your life, Malititi. I'm not worth your life.* But she knew Malititi would've heartily disagreed if he were alive. His loyalty had been complete. He'd been waiting for her when she returned to her quarters after the fateful conversation with her father. She'd not even needed to speak. He'd taken one look at her face and known.

"It's time." That's all he'd said.

But Naa Gbewaa correctly deduced that she intended to flee and confined her to her quarters. Even then, Malititi risked the chief's wrath to send her men's clothes and leaves from a kapok tree. She'd immediately known what to do, and where he would be waiting to escort her to freedom. Not long after she received the message, a raging fire broke out in the warriors' quarters, drawing the attention of everyone in the village, and giving her a chance to quickly don the clothes and slip out of her quarters. She'd run all night and when she arrived at the kapok tree, Malititi and seven other warriors from her contingent had been waiting for her. They'd even brought her horse, Ouedraogo, knowing she would've been heartbroken to leave the animal behind. The first couple of days of their journey had been uneventful. They'd moved fast, counting on Naa Gbewaa's unwillingness to make Yennenga's disappearance public. They'd known, nonetheless, that the princess' familiar lithe form on her horse was one the people of Pusiga had come to expect. They would wonder where she was, especially if healers and diviners weren't called to the palace. Also, Napoco, her mother, wouldn't be silent with her worry, no matter what Naa Gbewaa said or did. When the Mandenkas attacked, they'd known that news of her disappearance had spread beyond the palace into the village where Mandenka spies often hid.

The Mandenka warrior had hung back from the melee, passively watching his companions fight from atop his horse. He didn't intervene, not even when his men were killed. But she had quickly seen through his ploy: they were all distracted, fighting his men, and watching for him to strike. It was working. Of the eight men who'd accompanied her from Pusiga, only two were left even though the Mandenka had lost more men. And then there was one. And then it was just her and Malititi. That was when the mysterious warrior made his move, aiming for

Malititi's neck with his long sword while Malititi fought the last remaining one of his men. He hadn't expected Yennenga to deflect the blow and cut his horse down from under him. He'd roared furiously as he fell to the ground but quickly regained his footing and picked up a spear discarded by one of his dead companions. But the pain from her injured arm set in, watering Yennenga's eyes with its intensity, so she'd been slow to move when the warrior struck again, throwing the spear at her. That's when Malititi, who'd just pulled his sword from his opponent's chest, stepped in. After Malititi fell, she picked up the assegai, ignoring the warrior's arrogant smile as he casually stooped to retrieve his long sword. Grief for all she'd lost and all she might never have kept her focused. She couldn't waste Malititi's sacrifice. But then, the Mandenka warrior spoke, revealing his identity.

"Ebou Kakay was my brother, you know." The man spoke in Dagbani even though he had to know Yennenga spoke and understood Maninka fluently. "I'd meant to kill you, but I won't. I'll keep you and when I'm finished with you, when you've borne me a son who'll have his name, I'll feed your body to his dogs."

It hurt to use her right hand but because the warrior didn't expect it, her attack worked seamlessly. She'd reached into the pouch of soil from the palace that she always carried on the girdle around her waist and thrown the particles into the man's eyes. When he'd closed them reflexively, lashing out haphazardly with his sword, she'd sidestepped his attack and thrust the assegai into his heart. She'd watched impassively as the man fell to his knees, disbelief slackening his face. She'd spoken then in Maninka. "Whoever goes to hunt the lion should expect to howl in fear."

Yennenga had killed many men in battle but breaking Ebou Kakay's brother's neck with her foot was the first time she'd enjoyed it.

## 4.

*Four days earlier...*

Yennenga spent the first night of her confinement in her rooms, face down on her sleeping mat, breathing slowly, trying to gather her spiraling thoughts. First came regret. Maybe she should never have picked up a weapon. Maybe she should never have shown any interest in horse riding. Maybe she should've stayed with the women, learning how to manage a household, and participating in zuya nwebu. She lingered with her regrets for a few moments before carefully rolling them up and tossing them out of the window into the night. She knew she wouldn't change anything about her life even though her father had only been happy to indulge her choices as long as they served his needs. She allowed herself the bitter thought and then set it too aside. Her time would be better spent thinking about how to get out of her predicament. She could hear the men her father instructed to monitor her talking and laughing outside. From a little further away, she could hear the noise of merrymaking coming from the warriors' quarters which adjoined the palace. The men would be seated around fires in the courtyard, bellies full of the evening meal, eating cola nuts, and drinking dazieu. In times of peace, the warriors took every opportunity to enjoy themselves. She smiled when she heard the familiar rhythms of a song in which they used sexual imagery to describe past battles. From what she could hear, there had to be at least four drummers with them. On another night she might've left her mat to join them but she doubted the men outside her door would let her leave. She felt sorry for them. They'd avoided

her gaze when they led her to her quarters following her father's orders. They'd fussed about, checking the surroundings presumably to make sure it was safe. She'd let them go through the motions even though they knew as well as she did that the palace was the safest place in Pusiga and even if it wasn't, she could take care of herself. It cost her nothing to let them feel like what they'd been ordered to do had a reason. The girls who brought her food were even more solicitous. One of them patted her back, smiled sympathetically, and reassured her that her father would change his mind. Yennenga was grateful for their kindness. Everyone knew Naa Gbewaa was being unreasonable but their loyalty would never let them voice their thoughts aloud. Yennenga understood her father. Her brothers were fine men, but their ambition made them unreliable. As much as their antics irritated her, she sympathized with them. It couldn't have been easy growing up in the shadow of the great Gbewaa, son of Kpogonumbo, son of Tohajie the Red Hunter, founder of their dynasty.

It certainly didn't make it better that their father turned first to her, a woman, and not to them for military advice. She felt most sorry for Zirili. As the first-born son, he tried so hard to live up to what was expected of him. But Naa Gbewaa had his military champion in her, and his ideal, wise ruler in Kofugo, their youngest brother. He didn't feel he needed Zirili. As he aged, it was harder and harder for him to hide his preferences or Zirili his resentments. Her other brothers watched Zirili and Kofugo like vultures waiting to feast on dead bodies after the animals stopped fighting. She knew her father's legacy would be left in ruins if their hostilities erupted, so she was ready to stand by his side. That was before she realized he wouldn't let her marry and start a family of her own. Her father's fear that a husband would expect her to assume the traditional roles of a wife and mother weren't

unfounded. She'd seen that gleam, a testimony to the smallness of their imaginations, in the eyes of some of her suitors. It was the same gleam she'd seen in the eyes of many men on the battlefield just before she cut them down.

But Yennenga was tired of war. She was tired of the constant fighting for land, the incessant death and suffering, the perpetual cycle of claims and counterclaims. Pusiga was never satisfied. The more Pusiga conquered, the more Pusiga wanted. It had all become insufferable. There were other ways to build greatness in a people. The women of Pusiga did mighty things with nothing other than hearts willing to open, hands willing to work, and bodies willing to continue to act as the portal through which Pusiga could step toward its aspirations. There were also things women did, things learned at the side of mothers, aunts, and sisters, which bonded the community together with ties invisible to the untrained eye. Yennenga now believed that these ways in which women held the fabric of the community together were as important as claiming more land. And she missed the company of women. As was customary, she'd left her mother's side at an early age to stay with the family of Tuteenya, her father's Kpanalana and Malititi's father. With her father's approval, his spear bearer had let her spend more and-as she demonstrated aptitude-even more time swimming, practicing archery, wrestling, and learning how to ride horses with Malititi and the other boys in his household, instead of with his wife and daughters. But when she was able to participate, she'd always enjoyed zuya nwebu, the time when the girls and women of the household gathered to flatten the floors in the rooms and compounds of newly built or renovated houses. She'd enjoyed spending time with them, learning how to grow and cook food, how to braid each other's hair, and how to care for the younger children. A people, like a family, needed balance between all

necessary elements if they were to grow. If Pusiga was going to become great, she wanted to play a role in making all its people ready for and worthy of that greatness. There were many things she couldn't do from the tip of her father's spear. Her mother, Napoco, for her part, worried about Yennenga's future co-wives.

"A house cat is not a lion," she would say to Yennenga as she braided her hair into the neat scalp-hugging rows she preferred. "They may both like to sleep in the sun but one's paw is bigger than the other."

"I understand, M ma," Yennenga would reassure her. "But the lion and the cat have the same basic nature. They both purr when stroked correctly."

Napoco's eyes had widened at the double entendre. "You spend too much time among the warriors, bia," the older woman grumbled.

"You're the one who wanted a son, aren't you?" Yennenga laughed.

"And see how Naawuni blessed me with a daughter who elevates me just like a son."

Napoco had been outraged when she heard of Naa Gbewaa's decision to confine Yennenga.

"Luyumi tiba wum a bayili yclli!" she'd begged from where she knelt before the chief. "A woman is the portal through which our ancestors come back to the world of the living. Don't you want to see your mother again? Or your father?"

Yennenga flinched at the memory of the impassive stare her father had directed at her mother before turning away. She rolled over on her mat and flung her arm over her face. She had to find a way to get out of these rooms.

## 5.

*In times past...*

The first time Yennenga rode a horse, she grabbed the reins and scrambled up the side of Tunteeya's horse when she was barely tall enough to reach her father's spear bearer's waist. She'd guided the horse to a light gallop around the compound while declaring that she would be the greatest horse rider Pusiga had ever seen. She'd already shown aptitude for archery and wrestling so when Tunteeya told Naa Gbewaa about her new interest, her father sent her a young mare. She named the horse Mpanko and spent hours on her back, racing the other boys. All of Pusiga became used to seeing Yennenga riding Mpanko around the village with Malititi by her side. Their friendship had grown after Malititi accepted that Yennenga would always beat him at any competition. Together they rode their horses, sparred, and practiced archery till their arms ached. Zirili, at the time still confident in Naa Gbewaa's regard, joined them sometimes, racing, wrestling, and shooting arrows determinedly alongside his sister who was clearly the better rider, fighter, and archer.

No one was surprised when Naa Gbewaa allowed Yennenga to train with Pusiga's warriors and started inviting her to his war council meetings. Her aptitude for strategy was well known among the warriors. Her contingents rarely ever lost during training exercises. There was some murmuring and dissent when she started riding out to battle with the warriors, but the ripples quickly died out when she demonstrated beyond question that her presence on the battlefield was an advantage. Yennenga always won and the

bansi had more songs to sing about her.

"We would count the ways to sing of your victories," they called out. "But who can count millet in a bag? You pour triumph from your hand like a successful farmer, your granary is never empty!"

"You ride across the battlefield like lightning across the sky," they sang at other times. "Your enemies fall down when they hear the thunder!"

"Svelte One who has befriended the enemy's quivers and bows! Their arrows change their minds midflight and fall to the ground!"

"Fierce Lioness of Pusiga! With you we have good health! With you we have peace of mind!"

Soon, warriors sought out the chance to ride by her side when they went out on military campaigns because the baansi sang for them too.

"You are worthy, Warriors of Pusiga! You have fought for the house and the palace. The chief and the princess. Your patrons will be chiefs and their families forever!"

The men who joined her contingent had their own songs. "We are the lions who follow the lioness to hunt," they sang. "We are the lightning that branches out and fills the sky, we are the thunder that shakes your bones!"

Pusiga loved its warrior princess, and she loved them back. They mourned with her when Mpango was injured during a battle and died not long after.

"Queen of Horses!" they sang. "The princess looks for you everywhere, but you are gone forever!"

When the horse master brought her Ouedraogo as a replacement horse, the baansi sang Ouedraogo's praises as loudly as they'd sung Mpango's. "Prince of Horses! When he

comes, who is mightier than you, our Yennenga will become a wife." But marriage was the last thing on Yennenga's mind.

The leaders of the peoples conquered by Pusiga, had started renegeing on their pledges of tribute and nearby kingdoms were getting bolder with their attacks. Expanding and defending Pusiga consumed Naa Gbewaa, and Yennenga campaigned by her father's side. Word of her exploits spread far and wide, bringing envoys from sultans, kings, other chiefs, or their heirs, all seeking Yennenga as a wife and the alliance with Naa Gbewaa this guaranteed.

"Flower which even our enemies want to see!" the baansi sang, but Naa Gbewaa denied them all. At first, Yennenga had been glad to let her father handle those matters while she focused on war craft.

"You don't wish to marry?" Malititi had asked her. "I will," Yennenga replied distractedly, expertly nocking an arrow, and releasing it into the heart of the figure they were using as a target. "Just not now."

When there were no enemies to repel or rebellions to squash, she happily joined the hunters to roam the bushes and forests around Pusiga or planted and harvested with the women.

"Huntress by whose bow and arrow Pusiga is fed," the baansi sang. "Mother who refuses to rest until her children are fed. It is always the harvesting season on your farms."

She'd dismissed the first stirrings of discontent, but the feelings had only grown, becoming especially poignant each time she left for a military campaign. Pusiga's familiar contours in the misty morning, the smells of burning wood and cooking food, the laughter of children and the singing voices of the women who cared for them, began to mean more to her.

“This is what we fight for,” she’d said to Malititi, sweeping her hand across Pusiga and the surrounding lands which they could see from their position on a small escarpment outside the village. “This is what we fight for, and I am starting to feel like I should spend less time away.”

“Then you must find a way to spend more time here,” Malititi responded with an understanding nod.

“I must,” Yennenga confirmed. “And I know just how I’m going to do that.”

## 6.

### Praise Song To Yennenga

*Oratory Spirits, speak so that I may learn to speak!  
Grandfather, Grandmother, I am stirring the pot,  
Add flour to the pot while I stir.  
Owner of the Earth, tread softly!  
Earthly Intercessor, tread softly!  
King of the Rear and the Fore, tread softly!  
Dagbon's Lion, tread softly!  
Gbuyunli, tread softly!  
Son of One who exits through the broken wall,  
Open your ears and hear matters of your father's house!  
You hold up your spear in victory,  
The tip of your spear has a name: Yennenga.  
The Lion begat a Lioness!  
Fierce Lioness of Pusiga!  
With you we have good health!  
With you we have peace of mind!  
Stubborn lioness who leads an army,  
With your tail, we tie the kingdom together!  
Ebou Kakay rode in armor.  
Even Ebou Kakay's horse strode in armor.  
The Mandenka's chests swelled.  
They beat their chests in pride.  
Who is mightier? They cried.  
There is no warrior like Ebou Kakay!  
Dagbon's warrior's spears wilted like grass in the sun.  
Arrows flew away in the wind like sorghum chaff.*

*Fear made their voices small,  
Dread made their faces smooth,  
But courage in the heart surpasses a beard on the face!*  
*Oratory Spirits, Spirits of my father!*  
*Courage in the heart surpasses a beard on the face!*  
*The Svelte One who befriends the enemy's arrows,  
When they shoot, their arrows fall down and lie prostrate.  
She rides across the battlefield like lightning across the sky,  
Her enemies fled when they heard the thunder.  
She cut Ebou Kakay's horse out from under him.  
She put two arrows in his neck.  
She put a spear in his heart.  
Spirits of my father!*  
*Courage in the heart surpasses a beard on the face!*  
*We would count the ways to sing of your victories Yennenga,  
But who can count millet in a bag?  
You pour triumph from your hand like a successful farmer,  
Your granary is never empty!  
Spirit of my father!  
Play and let others dance!*

## 7.

The sharp gasp punctuating the weak moan drew Yennenga's attention to the thicket of trees. Her first instinct was to spur Ouedraogo and ride away. Her father's calvary had, just a few days ago, raided a Bissa village and killed their Tindaamba. Bissa spies had also recently been sighted in the bushes around Pusiga. It was possible that the Bissa were planning a counterraid and she was alone in the forest, far from Pusiga. But what she'd heard sounded like a person in pain, not a warrior about to attack. Yennenga decided to investigate. She didn't stop immediately. She continued riding until she found another dense thicket of trees where she hid Ouedraogo before quietly retracing her steps to where she'd heard the sound. Malititi would be irate if he knew what she was doing, which is precisely why she never told him or anyone else when she left the village. Dangerous as it was, she treasured the time she spent away from the palace. She rode as far away as reason and safety would allow, sometimes giving Ouedraogo the freedom to roam wild. He always found the most interesting places: a hidden spring, a strangely shaped tree, a cave in the Gambaga hills. Once they'd stumbled upon what appeared to be a Kussasi spy camp. The Kussasi were another people Naa Gbewaa's army had driven from their lands. They, too, organized counterraids and would often send scouts to find Pusiga's weak points. That day, she'd hidden Ouedraogo just as she had today, climbed a kapok tree near the camp and waited for the spies to return, intending to kill them all before they had a chance to go anywhere near Pusiga. The people, when they'd returned, consisted of a man, his two wives, and their

children: a girl old enough to be married, another girl who looked like she would soon be seeing her flows, two playful and long-limbed boys who looked like twins, a young child who was still learning to walk, and an infant. One of the women, the younger one, was pregnant. The older girls and the twins were definitely the offspring of the older wife. They all had her broad forehead, full lips, and quick mischievous laugh. The other child and the infant belonged to the other wife. They didn't resemble her as strongly as their siblings resembled their mother, but they clung to her as if she alone could protect them from the surrounding dark forest. From atop the tree, Yennenga watched them, a strange feeling, which she eventually recognized as envy, burning in her chest. Wherever they'd been during the day, the family were glad to be back at their camp. They cooked and ate their evening meal in companionable silence and then sat around the fire, talking quietly among themselves. When they settled down to sleep, the women huddled together with their children while the man kept watch. Yennenga kept watch with him, wondering where they were going and why they were traveling without other people. Alone, the man stood no chance if they were attacked. The twins were old enough to have received some basic training in wrestling and archery if they were Dagomba. But they weren't so she had no way of knowing if they could help their father if need arose. The man drifted off to sleep once or twice but always woke up after a few moments. Yennenga admired his dedication, but she knew he wouldn't last the night. When he fell into a deep sleep, she slipped down the tree and returned to Ouedraogo who'd stayed where she left him as she knew he would. She met Malititi and a search party on her way back to Pusiga. His disapproving frown changed into one of concern when she informed him about the family asleep in the bushes. He'd nodded at two other warriors who'd

slipped off into the quiet night. Relieved that the family would be safe, she let Malititi chide her as he escorted her back to the palace. They both knew she would slip off again.

She slipped into the thicket of trees, wondering what she would find this time. She could hear nothing but the rustle of the wind, the call of birds, and the thudding sound of her own heartbeat. For a few moments, Yennenga wondered if she'd imagined the sound. But then she heard it again, a low moan, a gasp, and a small whimper of distress. Whoever was in those bushes was in deep pain. She released the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding and walked toward the sound, pushing through shrubs and low hanging branches, no longer being careful to hide her presence.

"Stop!" a hoarse voice called out in Dagbani. "Don't come closer!"

Yennenga paused in alarm, contemplating, not responding. But this person sounded female and elderly. She obviously posed no threat.

"You are Dagomba?" Yennenga responded. "I am too. I mean you no harm. You are hurt. Why are you out here by yourself?"

Silence followed her question. She knew the person had heard and understood her, so she waited.

"Why are you out here by yourself, Princess? It is not safe."

"You know who I am?" Yennenga asked cautiously.

"Pusiga's Lioness is known to all who she protects."

Yennenga could hear the smile in the words. "Then you must know I'll not hurt you," she said. "Let me help you."

"I am helping you, bia. You must stay away. I am not well. Jirìgìntólí bit me."

"O M ma," Yennenga breathed in dismay.

"I am childless. I left before the bahasi declared me a witch."

Yennenga closed her eyes and breathed slowly and deeply, letting the grief and helplessness the woman's words evoked

pass through her. Those infected with leprosy lived difficult enough lives. But to be an elderly, childless woman infected with leprosy was a death sentence.

“What can I do, Mother? How can I help?”

“I’m beyond help, bia. I’ll die before sunrise tomorrow.”

“Then I’ll stay with you,” Yennenga said, looking around for somewhere to sit in the bush.

“Your friend, the Kpanalana’s son, won’t be happy.”

Yennenga chuckled. Her frequent jaunts away from Pusiga and Malititi’s determined efforts to keep her safe were well known among the people.

“Why have you not married him?” the woman continued. “It is clear he treasures you and he would make a good husband.”

The question made Yennenga laugh aloud. “Malititi is like my brother.”

“He certainly treats you like a beloved sister,” the woman agreed. “But we often wondered if that is because you don’t see what he carries so gently in his heart for you.”

“We?” Yennenga asked.

The woman’s response was slow in coming. “There are those of us who listen and watch. A secret discussed results in blinking of one’s eyes.”

Yennenga blinked confusedly.

“Don’t trouble yourself with the ramblings of a sick, old woman,” the other woman laughed. “But know that the Kpanalana’s son would make a fine husband should you ever tire of war.”

“It is not because I don’t want to marry that I have no husband,” Yennenga said softly. “If no one who has come courting leaves with good news to take to his people, it is because Naa Gbewaa doesn’t wish to send them away with good news.”

“I see,” the woman said thoughtfully. “Does your father know about your desire to marry?”

“I haven’t talked to him about it,” Yennenga sighed heavily. “But I haven’t refused any of my suitors either.”

“I see,” the woman said again. They sat in silence, listening to wind and birdsong. “You should plant okra,” the woman said finally.

## 8.

### *Day of the ambush...*

Yennenga stayed at Malititi's side, holding his body close, rocking back and forth, and humming despondently. She rode the waves of grief, letting them carry her into the soft breeze rustling the leaves overhead instead of the bottomless hole Malititi's death had opened in her center. The hole yawned, inviting her into its warm, dark embrace, promising peace. Within it, she could stay with her friend as life slowly drained out of her and together, they would slowly rot, crumbling into the wet forest soil. It promised an end to the pain tearing her heart apart with steady, deliberate hands. But she knew that Malititi wouldn't have wanted her to climb into the hole.

"You must keep going," he would've said. "There might be more Mandenka coming."

She heard his voice clearly, as if he stood next to her, but Yennenga couldn't bring herself to care. Let the Mandenka come. Malititi was dead. Malititi, the one person who'd always been able to see her as just another person—albeit one burdened with a royal lineage and a talent to orchestrate destruction was dead. Malititi, the one person who'd cherished her desire to nurture and affirm life, was dead. Nothing mattered anymore. Let the Mandenka come. She would stay right here by her friend's side. Ouedraogo returned from wherever he and the other horses had run to when the Mandenka attacked. He nudged her shoulder and huffed questioningly. Yennenga didn't respond, so he stood patiently by her side. Something shuffled in the grass behind them. A bird called out and another

responded. Flies buzzed around, drawn by the fresh blood. A mosquito settled on her arm. The sting of its bite and the itch after it drank its fill and flew away barely registered. She heard flapping wings and the soft thud of a bird, a vulture probably, landing on the flattened, bloody grass next to one of the dead men. Good, she thought. After all, how many people had she left to be a feast for vultures and hyenas? How many warriors had sat, immobilized by grief, next to the bodies of beloved friends felled by her hand?

“You must keep going, or all of this would’ve been for nothing.” Malititi’s voice echoed in her mind again. *I can’t leave you here, Malititi.* She mourned silently. *If vultures must eat you, if the forest must claim you, let me stay by your side.*

“You must go now, Yennenga.” His voice was as gently insistent in death as he was in life.

*No!* Yennenga squeezed Malititi tighter, hummed louder and rocked faster. With each passing moment, she felt his body settle into the heavy rigidity of death. Blood from where the spear had struck him soaked her clothes, the warm stickiness a sickening reminder of her loss. She closed her eyes, humming louder, and rocking even faster. Time passed and passed and stopped mattering. More vultures landed in the bloody clearing. Thunder rumbled in the distant skies. A cloud settled over the sun. The sky darkened. Thunder rumbled again, and then a drop of rain landed on her cheek. Then another. Then more. She was soaked to the skin in not too long. Warm rivulets of muddy, bloody water ran down her face and back. Ouedraogo nudged her shoulder again. She continued to ignore him and everything else. She would stay right here by Malititi’s side. It was only right. A cloud of insects surrounded her, heedless of the rain. She let them be, rising further into her buoyant grief. The rain continued to fall in gentle, pulsing waves. Thunder rumbled again, and continued to rumble, growing louder by

the moment. Ouedraogo nudged her shoulder harder. When she didn't respond, he whinnied and nudged her again then stomped his feet in the muddy soil. That got her attention. She lifted her head from Malititi's neck and listened. The thundering sound continued but it wasn't coming from the skies overhead, she realized. She looked up into the sky and blinked furiously when a raindrop landed in her eye. Then it struck her. That wasn't thunder she heard, but the sound of a calvary. Was it her father's men? Was it more Mandenka warriors? Did it matter? Either way, she couldn't let them find her here. Ouedraogo whinnied again and stomped his feet more restlessly.

"It's time we said goodbye, m tivo." Malititi's voice was gentle in her mind. A sob caught her unawares and she choked on the pain of it. Her tears came then, scalding their way down her cheeks. *Forgive me, Malititi.*

"There is nothing to forgive, Yen-Yen. I would do it all again, given a chance. You are worth everything, remember? You are worth everything and that is why Naawuni made sure we could all see why. Now, go."

Still sobbing, she gently laid his body to rest in the waterlogged soil, stood up and looked around her. She spotted her spear sticking out of a Mandenka warrior's back and walked over to retrieve it. Malititi's spear lay in the grass next to the dead man. She picked it up and then pulled off the dead warrior's smock and his turban from around his head. The different clothes and the voluminous folds of the turban would be a good disguise. A quick look around assured her that there was nothing else she needed. She briefly considered taking Malititi's body with her, but she knew his weight would only slow her down. She apologized again to her friend and called Ouedraogo over to where she stood.

## 9.

*Five days later...*

Riale still couldn't believe the person sitting across from him was a woman but he could see the soft curve of her breasts under her smock and with the turban no longer wrapped around her head, her face, now washed clean of mud, revealed soft, brown eyes and full lips. Five days ago when she'd ridden her great, black stallion into the clearing of his forest hut, he'd reached for his bow and arrow, ready to fight who he'd thought was a young Mandenka warrior. The stranger had held his hands up and spoken in Maninka, assuring Riale that he meant him no harm. He'd asked for food, medicine for his wounds, and a place to rest and heal. Riale had offered his hut and supplies, When he saw the gash in the warrior's arm, he'd hurried off to find clean water. The warrior had made quick work of cleaning and binding the wound and gratefully accepted the food and water he offered. Before he'd fallen into exhausted sleep, he'd begged Riale to hide his horse. He'd agreed without a second thought. The horse was magnificent and could attract attention from the wrong kind of people.

Later that day, a calvary of Mandenka warriors had ridden past his hut. When one of them stopped to ask if he'd seen a Dagomba woman in the area, something about the edge in the man's voice made Riale wary so he'd lied. His people, the Bissa, were constantly under threat from the Dagomba, the Kussasi, the Mandenka, and other people who coveted their lands. He was tired of the constant warfare so he stayed

away from villages, choosing instead to live in various huts hidden in the bushes. What was the point of marrying wives, having children, and staying in a village when a calvary could ride in at any moment to kill them all and carry away those who survived? He returned to his people as often as he could but even there, there was trouble. His father, the chief, would die soon. His brothers, every single one of them, aspired to the royal seat. Riale knew his disinterest wouldn't protect him from the others when they moved to seize power. The bushes offered safety and elephant hunting was profitable. Nobody cared who he was when he brought them ivory.

The stranger slept all that day and well into the next morning. Riale stayed up all night keeping watch, worried that the Mandenka might return. He knew his guest was hiding something when his eyes flared in alarm as Riale told him about the Mandenka calvary the next morning. He could hardly judge, living in the forest away from others as he did.

Whatever problems the young wounded Mandenka man had, Riale felt a sense of camaraderie with him.

"I only need to rest and heal," the warrior reassured him gruffly. "I'll be on my way in not too long."

"You can stay here for as long as you need," Riale had assured him. "This is only one of my many huts. I hunt elephants so I have other places in these bushes where I can go."

The warrior thanked him profusely and then retreated to the hut to rest some more. He'd been able to do nothing but eat and sleep for the next couple of days, so Riale made sure food and clean water were available and took care of the horse. But then the previous night, a sharp cry coming from the hut had brought Riale rushing in, fearing danger. Instead, he'd found the warrior caught in the throes of a nightmare and in his tossing and turning, the turban which he always kept on had fallen away, revealing long braided hair. Puzzled by the

warrior's appearance but also worried about the man's safety, Riale squatted next to the bed and reached out to shake his arm to wake him up. The still-sleeping man shifted just then so Riale touched a soft breast. He'd jerked away and stared at the dark prone form in confused alarm before rekindling the fire in the hut to give himself light to see better. It was a woman in the bed, not a man as he'd believed. Wondering who she was and why she was wounded, alone, and dressed in men's clothing, Riale retreated and kept vigil at the door, listening to her mutter in her nightmare. His heart thundered fearfully when he'd realized that she was muttering not in Maninka which she spoke with him, but in Dagbani. There was only one Dagbani woman who rode a great, black horse, but surely this wasn't the great Yennenga, Naa Gbewaa's daughter? He'd spent the whole night wondering fearfully about how much trouble he might find himself in if Dagomba warriors came looking for their princess and found her injured in a Bissa hunter's hut. When she emerged from his hut this morning, turban firmly around her head, her face drawn and tired from her sleepless night, he said nothing to her, watching her quietly as she tended to her horse and then settled down to check her wounds.

"You should eat more," he said in Dagbani, offering her some dried elephant meat. "It will help you heal faster."

"Thank you," she replied absentmindedly, and then looked sharply at him when she realized her mistake. Her hand immediately went to the spear she'd brought with her from the hut.

"I mean you no harm, Princess," Riale said in Dagbani, raising his empty hands so she could see them. "But I am worried. You are far from home and the Mandenka roam the forests looking for a Dagomba woman."

"The Mandenka are not the only ones who might want to capture me," Yennenga replied in Bissano.

"I mean you no harm," he repeated in Bissano. "And yes, I am Bissa, but I hunt elephants and I live in the forest. I prefer it that way. I am Riale, Son of Nakomse."

She leveled a considering gaze on him and then looked away, consternation on her face. She didn't reply.

"I have more meat if you're still hungry," he offered gently. She looked back at him and nodded so he cut off a piece and handed it to her.

"Your father must be looking for you, Princess," he said softly. She didn't respond immediately but when she spoke her words were laden with anger and sorrow. "I don't want him to find me. And don't call me Princess."

"Why?" Riale blurted before he could stop himself.

"What kind of a father denies his child a chance at happiness? What kind of a father refuses his own daughter a chance to marry? What kind of a man denies himself the blessing of grandchildren?"

"You mean your father..." Riale trailed off, stunned into silence.

Yennenga nodded. "Some of my warriors helped me escape. The Mandenka must have found out. They attacked us some days ago. I am the only one who survived."

Riale was still too shocked to speak.

"I must find somewhere to go where no one will know who I am. Then I want to start my life over. I want to find a husband and bear children."

"I see," Riale said. "Do you know where you want to go? I've traveled everywhere. I can help you."

She paused mid-chew and looked up at him. "Don't you have a home? A wife? A family?"

He shook his head no. "I live alone in the forests because there is trouble at home, both from within... and without."

It took her a moment to understand, and her eyes slid away guiltily when she did. "I'm sorry."

“You did what was expected of you, Princess. We all step into the roles family and fate assign us.”

“But we can choose different fates even if we can’t choose our families,” Yennenga said, holding his gaze. “You have, Son of Nakomse.”

“Yes, we can,” Riale agreed, holding her gaze.

“Then I accept your offer,” Yennenga said, reaching up to unwrap the turban from around her head. “I’ll travel with you. And we’ll find our fates together.”

*The End.*

# The Tragedy of Clever Hatumata Djaora

*Fulani, West Africa*

“YOUR HUSBAND SAYS you are to give us the gold he left under your bed. It is a lot of gold. A quantity enough to cover him from head to foot.”

Hatumata’s world constricts into a single point of shock when she hears Wagana’s words but they elicit no reaction from the other people in the courtyard. The girls seated around her continue their sewing. The women near the fire chatter among themselves as they take turns pounding millet in the large mortar sitting between them. Their children chase each other across the courtyard, laughing as they run. The guards at the gatehouse continue their conversation. One of them throws an old bone and the dogs chase after it, barking excitedly. Meanwhile, the point of shock expands into a bubble which grows wider with each moment that passes, ballooning

upward, expanding to Hatumata's chest, squeezing through her throat. She catches it in her mouth and holds it there, knowing that the sound of it bursting out would be a primal scream of grief. Her eyes stay on Wagana and his companions as she struggles to compose herself. Of the seven men in front of her, Goroba is the only one who shows any signs of discomfort. His round face is slick with sweat, his eyes shift around the compound, and his lips tremble as he breathes. Wagana looks bored. The others, Numuka, Sidi, Sira, Dunkoro, and Amadu seem perfectly at ease, their faces calm. It takes a few more moments before Hatumata is sure she can speak without screaming.

"Ah... yes, the gold he left behind," she says, then pauses for a few more breaths before speaking again. "It is a lot of gold, indeed. Enough to cover a man from head to foot as Kide told you. I must call my father and his men to be present while I execute my husband's wishes. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course." Wagana's smile is smug. "We will wait. Some things are better discussed among men, and I trust Sirima Djaora will make a good decision this time."

Hatumata ignores Wagana's thinly veiled insult and turns to Alanj, her most trusted servant.

"Send a message to my father," she instructs. "Tell him Wagana is here for a business matter with Kide but Kide left this morning to go to his people. Tell him I need him to come with some of his men to help."

The old servant knows something is wrong, but he obeys his mistress without question. After he dispatches a messenger to Hatumata's father, he directs servants to take Wagana and his men's horses away and spread mats on the ground for them. Other servants bring millet beer. Heart pounding and eyes blurring with unshed tears, Hatumata returns her attention to the tunic she is embroidering. She makes a stitch and then

another, keeping the needle from falling from her fingers by sheer force of will. On the surface, she is a calm woman at work, head of a well-run and prosperous household. But underneath that calm exterior, her heart has shattered into thousands of sharp fragments. She pushes away the awful truth possibly hidden in Wagana's message and focuses instead on masking her knowledge of it until her father arrives with reinforcements. She has enough men in her compound to capture Wagana and his companions. Her compound is well protected. It has gatehouses at all three entrances staffed by guards and fierce dogs. If she shouts a warning, the compound would be sealed and no one would be able to enter or leave. But she couldn't afford to make any mistakes or risk letting these men escape. Not after what they might've done. She would wait for her father to arrive. Hopefully, he will notice that she has called for him and his men. From beneath her eyelashes, she examines the group for evidence of their crime. They all look clean and freshly groomed, which would be well and good except it is past midday, time enough for some grime from the day to have settled onto their bodies. A little dust on their feet from walking. Sweaty arm pits from exertion. But they all look like they have just finished their morning ablutions and put on fresh clothes. All except for Goroba who is still nervously looking around the compound, oblivious to the gourd of millet beer in front of him. That alone would've given him away. Goroba never denies himself the pleasure of millet beer or honey beer or any other kind of drink. That was why she refused his offer of marriage even before she subjected him to the test. The same test which Kide had easily passed.

*Kide!*

Hatumata's chest tightens again and she gasps. Worried she's given herself away, she puts a finger into her mouth, pretending to have stuck her finger with the needle. She feigns

embarrassment when she lifts her eyes to check if any of her guests are watching but none of them noticed. They are mostly talking among themselves and drinking the beer her servants have poured. Goroba is now also drinking but he looks around nervously between sips. Wagana is laughing at something Numuka said. Dunkoro and Amadu laugh with him. Sira is silent, staring pensively into his gourd of beer. Sidi, who sits closest to her, is looking at her. She can smell the cloying scent of the jasmine perfume he sells wafting from his clothes. Each of the seven men in her courtyard had at some point in the past tried to court her but she'd rejected them all. Of all of them, however, Sidi is the only person she'd been shocked to see in this group of miscreants. He was the only one she would've agreed to marry if he'd passed her test. But he failed. Before today, she would've simply thought of him as a good man with tastes too simple to satisfy her need for mental stimulation. But given the company he's in, given what she knows they might've done, Hatumata sees what she'd missed then. Sidi is a lizard who wants to be a crocodile. His desire to marry her had been an effort in that direction. His decision to join Wagana was either another attempt to fit in, or his retaliation after her rejection. Either way, it told her the kind of man he is. A follower, easily influenced, easily corrupted.

Hatumata focuses her attention back on the indigo cloth and carefully makes another stitch. Better than to shove the needle into Sidi's eye. Wagana laughs again and she grits her teeth, forcing herself to remain calm. She'd rejected Wagana before he even had a chance to court her. She wouldn't even entertain his request for courtship. Her father hadn't questioned her decision. Sirima Djaora knew his daughter must've had a good enough reason to reject the most eligible man in the city. He also knows who Wagana is beneath his good looks and smooth talk. Wagana's father is the richest trader in the city

and a friend of the King. For that, Wagana believes he is to be refused nothing. It had taken a plainly worded warning from her father to stop Wagana from hounding Hatumata after her rejection. She should've known he wouldn't forget the slight.

*Oh, Kide!*

Her father arrives just as the men finish the second round of beer her servants pour. His retinue of guards stream into the compound and for the first time since Wagana and his men arrived, Hatumata feels relief.

“Greetings, Alhaji Sirima!” Wagana calls out, rising to his feet. His companions follow suit. Hatumata flushes with satisfaction when she sees that they look nervous at the sight of her father’s stern-faced guards.

“Greetings, Wagana!” Sirima Djaora responds, descending from his horse. “My daughter’s messenger says you have word from her husband. An important business matter?”

“Yes, we come with a message from the man who married Hatumata.”

“Go ahead, Wagana,” Hatumata says, finally letting her anger flow into her tone when she realizes that Wagana’s bile is so bitter that he wouldn’t even speak Kide’s name. “Repeat the whole message my husband gave you.” She rises and spits on the ground at Wagana’s feet. Silence spreads across the courtyard. Wagana’s lips curl but he ignores her gesture of contempt and walks over to her father.

“Her husband,” he sneers, “told us to tell his wife that she is to give us the gold under her bed. It is a lot of gold, so he told us that if she refuses to believe us, we should tell her this: My long-trousered companion is with me from morning until night. My old companion with the questing head is with me from dusk until dawn, and I am expecting a companion who has

neither hands nor feet. He said if we tell her this, she will know what he means and will see to it that we get the gold he owes us. Now, tell her to give us the gold so we can be on our way.”

Hatumata’s world reels as she listens to Wagana’s words. The small part of her that hoped she’d wrongly interpreted the message flies away in a gust of wind. Wagana’s just-spoken words removed all doubt from her mind. Kide was dead.

“Father, have you heard everything?” Hatumata asks, her voice hoarse with rising grief.

“Yes, Daughter,” Sirima responds, casting a worried look in her direction. “I have heard everything.”

“Good,” Hatumata says. She walks over to stand in front of her father. “You know these men. I rejected each of them when they asked to marry me. They have reason to be envious of Kide, who I chose to marry.”

A murmur rolls through the people in the courtyard.

“You also know Kide is not from this city,” Hatumata continues. “You know Wagana and these men would have nothing to do with him because of that. What service could they possibly have performed for him that he owes them so much gold? Kide was here with me for the duration of his stay. He said nothing about any business he had in the city or with any of them. Not even before he left this morning.”

“You accuse us of lying?” Wagana snarls. “You accuse *me* of lying?”

“Yes, I do!” Hatumata snarls back at him. “I do because I don’t have any gold under my bed. This message Kide sent has a different meaning. The gold that covers him from head to foot is the blood that flows from the blow on his head down to his feet. The companion who is with him, the long-trousered one, is the vulture whose feathers cover its legs. The vulture that pecks at his corpse all day. The companion that stays with him from dusk till dawn, the one with the questing head,

is the jackal that tears at his flesh at night. The companion he is expecting, the one with neither hands nor feet, are the worms that will infest and destroy his corpse. Kide is dead! You murdered him!" Her words ring around the courtyard.

"How dare you—"Wagana begins, but Sirima Djaora flicks his hand and his men grab Wagana and the others.

"Murderers!" Hatumata shouts at them. "Your envy is your poison, and your greed is your doom! Kide's intention is perfectly clear! All seven of you must be given the gold he owes you. I'll shed your blood as you have shed his, that is the gold I'll give you!"

---

*Some days earlier...*

"How did you know?" Hatumata's question stops Kide in his tracks. His eyes travel up to her face from where they were fixed on the dark vee between her legs. She smiles when their eyes meet.

"How did I know what?" Kide's voice is rough with desire.  
"How did you know what to do? When to come?"

"Oh..." Kide chuckles. He reaches out and flicks her left nipple with a finger. "Well, on the first day you sent me millet porridge with four red cola nuts and a bone with barely any meat on it."

"I did," Hatumata replies softly, leaning into his touch.

"Cola nuts are not normally served with millet porridge." Kide continues to flick her nipple as he speaks and it hardens into a dark point of need. "So I knew the meal had to mean something. All four cola nuts were red so I concluded that you were having your monthly flow and I had to wait. Now the

bone, it confused me for some time. It was clearly not for a man to eat, there was barely any meat on it. But I remembered that Alanj, your servant, told me your compound is guarded by dogs. I kept it for them.”

“You are very observant,” Hatumata groans. *And thoughtful, and kind...*”

“When it comes to you, my love, no detail is too small or unimportant. They say a tasty sauce will make a man sit to enjoy it. You are very tasty.”

Hatumata laughs.

“And look what my observations have won me,” Kide continues, his eyes glittering with pride and admiration as they look over Hatumata’s bare body. “The most beautiful woman in Wagadou! The most beautiful woman in the entire world. And the cleverest!” He adds the last part quickly.

Hatumata chuckles and steps toward her bed. “Tell me the rest,” she instructs, opening her arms to him.

“Of course, my love,” Kide croons, sliding his tunic over his head.

The first time they make love, it is fast and urgent, a slaking of thirst after a long, dry spell. The second time is slower. An exploration of flavor, a savoring of the drink. Languid and satisfied, they continue their conversation.

“When you sent two white cola nuts and two red ones the next day, I knew my conclusion about your flow was correct. When I saw the bone, I sent Buge to check for how many dogs there are in your compound. He told me three, so I knew that if you sent me a third bone, I was interpreting your messages correctly.”

“Your friends are very loyal to you,” Hatumata remarks.

“Loyal, yes,” Kide laughs. “But not as daring. Buge wanted nothing to do with tonight’s adventure. He called it risky business and went to sleep with his friend in the city so if things go wrong, he can say he had nothing to do with it.”

Buge was the older of the two companions Kide had arrived with. Age had definitely made him cautious.

“And the other one?” Hatumata asks.

“Mamadi is still at Alanj’s house. He refused to accompany me on my walk over here but he said he will stay so he can help me escape if necessary.”

“Good thing that won’t be necessary!”

“Good thing, indeed!”

“And so the third day?” Hatumata prompts.

“Yes, the third day,” Kide continues. “When I saw the four white cola nuts, I knew your flow was over and when I saw the third bone, I knew you were sending me something to distract the dogs with. The half-covered dish told me that your door would be half-closed and you would be waiting for me.”

“And the other items?”

“I wasn’t sure at first,” Kide admits. “But I knew that if you had sent them, I would have use for them so I kept them with me. Turns out I was right, you brilliant woman!”

He pulls her into a kiss and they forget about riddles for a long time. It is well into the night before they continue the conversation.

“After Buge left, I took the bones, the bit of straw, the grain of tommono, and the cotton seed you sent and walked over here. Some guard dogs you have there! They were incredibly happy with the bones. They didn’t make a sound. The one at the second gatehouse flipped over on his back for me to scratch his belly after I gave him the bone.”

“Gomble is a sweet dog, but he is quite fierce when he needs to be!” Hatumata chuckles.

“I’ll bring you some of my guard dogs when I return,” Kide promises. “My Uncle Mussa breeds the fiercest dogs in Wagadou.”

“I like my dogs just fine,” Hatumata sniffs. “But bring a female dog if you must. We can breed a new bloodline. Tell me about the seeds.”

“Yes, the seeds. After I escaped the vicious guard dogs—”

“Don’t make fun of my dogs!” Hatumata chides, pinching him.

Kide yelps and pulls away from her, laughing. “I’ll stop, my love. I’ll stop.”

“Yes, stop and tell me how you deciphered my clues when no man has succeeded before.”

“That just means they weren’t the right kind of man for you.”

“They were certainly not!” Hatumata snorts. “They all thought because they are rich, with great herds and many horses, I would marry them. But I am not fond of rich men. I prefer clever ones. Brains and wit.”

“I am very, very fortunate to be clever then!” Kide teases.

“Yes, you are. I prize cleverness the most in a man.”

“I am glad your father let you choose a husband for yourself,” Kide murmurs, pressing a kiss into her shoulder. “The thought of you with another man makes me feel murderous.”

Hatumata smiles. *How lucky I am to have found my perfect match.*

“I am glad too,” she says. “Now, tell me the rest!

“I will, you impatient woman!”

He kisses her a couple of times and then continues to speak. “When I came to the fork in the road after the gatehouses, I immediately knew where to go because I saw the grains of tommono on the ground. When I arrived in your courtyard, I knew which door was yours because of the straw mat that covered it, but only halfway, just like my food. And even if I had any doubts, the cotton seed you left at your door was all the reassurance I needed. And so I found you, waiting for me in all your glory. More beautiful than even the songs they sing about you say. My love. My wife.”

Kide pulls her into his arms for more kisses.

“Do you really love me, Kide?” Hatumata asks breathlessly as Kide burrows into her neck.

“I love you, Hatumata, daughter of Sirima Djaora,” he murmurs, licking her collarbone. “I love you now and I’ll love you forever! Even if I die in the bush and the long-trousered vulture, or the jackal with his questing head, or the worm who has neither hands nor feet, are my only companions, even then, I’ll love you.”

They only speak in gasps and groans for the rest of the night.

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Hatumata knows Goroba will break easiest so she directs her father’s men to question him about what they did to Kide. Just as she predicted, Goroba crumbles and reveals their whole plot. Wagana suspected Hatumata had chosen Kide since he’d stayed in Alanj’s house for three full days when no man had lasted beyond a day. His suspicions were confirmed when he saw Kide in Hatumata’s compound. Enraged by Hatumata’s rejection and the fact that she’d chosen a man not even from their city, Wagana had rounded up the other men who Hatumata had also rejected. They’d waited, hiding themselves on the road to Kide’s father’s city, knowing that Kide would eventually need to leave to return to his people and tell them the news of his marriage. They ambushed him when he walked by. Kide had pleaded for his life, offering them the gold he’d brought as a dowry for Hatumata. Ever greedy, Wagana pretended to accept his bargain. He listened carefully as Kide told them how to win Hatumata’s trust and take the gold from her, and then struck Kide on the head with his sword. Goroba reveals where they buried Kide and

Sirima Djaora dispatches men to confirm. They come back with Kide's dirty, bloody body, thankfully still intact but for the ugly gash on his head.

Wagana's father, Hamadi Gindo, arrives with a retinue of his own, demanding that his son be released. For a few moments, it looks like a fight might break out between Hamadi Gindo's men and Sirima Djaora's, but an envoy from the King arrives just in time to stop the fight. Word about what has happened has spread all the way to the palace. The King summons them all.

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Wagana and his companions don't have a long trial. No one speaks in their defense and Kide's dead body is all the evidence need. The King sentences them to death.

"Let their blood flow above Kide's burial ground," the King declares. "Let it flow over their bodies, from head to foot. Throw their bodies into the bush afterward for the vultures, the jackals, and the worms. Let the fate they gave to Kide be theirs."

Hatumata presides over their executions.

*The End*

# The Rain God's Bride

*Amazigh, Algeria*

THE ARDENT WAY Anazar loves me frightened me at first. My people are holy and humble people, you see. We love the earth for giving us homes and food. We cherish the skies for the clouds and the rains which bring precious water. We stay in our mountain homes in the summer months, raising our herds, keeping our bees, and growing our vegetables and grains. When winter comes, we move to the lowlands to pitch our tents and wait for the warm weather to return. I, especially, loved my life. Don't misunderstand me, I beg you! I love my life even more now that I am wrapped up in the embrace of Anazar, who rules the rains and makes my heart sing. (Imagine that! I, Teslit, married the God of Rain!) But I loved my life before Anazar came. I loved to walk the paths of the Aures mountains, talking with the earth, the wind, the plants, and the animals. I pressed my greetings into the earth with my feet and the earth left dusty kisses on them to greet me in return. The birds waved hello with

their wings as they flew by. I visited the trees with the wind and they shook their leaves in welcome. The bees carried my greetings from flower to flower. I was happiest when I came to the springs and they were always happy to see me too! They would skip from rock to rock, glittering in the bright sunlight, chattering happily as they told me the news from further up the mountain.

“The gazelle has new fawns! The jackals are quarreling again! The old eagle has died!”

I always agreed when they asked me to play. They love to fly.

“It reminds us of when we fell as raindrops!” they would say, as I gathered them up in handfuls and threw them up into the air. We all laughed joyfully as they fell back to the ground. I also sang them songs and shared news of my people.

“The harvest is good. The goats have doubled in number.

It has been so dry lately, we hope the rains will come early and linger long.”

Each time I wished for the rain, it came, darkening the skies above the mountains, soaking the earth with much needed water. I danced in the shower of its fall, hands raised to the sky, mouth open in ecstasy. Little did I know then who it was that was always so eager to come to me.

So like I said at the beginning, I was frightened when Anazar finally showed himself to me. He appeared in a flash of lightning and a clap of thunder. He bowed to me and passionately declared his love. I was speechless. I knew I was in the presence of a God. My heart burst into a field of flowers when he asked if we could meet again to talk and get to know each other better, but I remembered the many warnings my father and brothers had given me about men who accost solitary women. I told the strange but beautiful man with storm grey eyes, whose voice reminded me of the thunders which roll over the mountains, that his behavior was unbecoming

and would bring me shame. Then, I ran away from him. This wounded his pride. Anazar is a sovereign used to having his way, and a well-intentioned God who had pursued and was shunned by a mortal woman. A mortal woman who, before then, had welcomed and basked in his attention. He left the mountains, confused and angry. When the rainy seasons came, no dark clouds hung over the Aures. The harvests dwindled. The animals grew skinny and sickly. The wind could only lift dead leaves from the ground and no flowers opened. When I went to the springs, I could barely hear their voices, so faint they were, so small the trickle coming from the mountains. But what they said made my heart tremble.

"He never meant to shame you, O Teslit," they whispered. "He only meant to tell you how much he loves you. Now he is gone and he took the rains with him."

"He never meant to shame me," I told them, "but he didn't honor me either!"

"Forgive him, O Teslit," they implored. "He suffers with love and desire for you, but his divine pride keeps him away." As they speak, I realized what I must do. I caressed the spring gently and sang softly as I threw handfuls of water into the air:

*When he speaks to me, my heart bursts into a field of flowers  
 Anazar my beloved, Anazar of the rain showers!  
 When he looks at me, rainbows form as bright light scatters  
 Come to me, my beloved, Anazar of the rain showers!*

Oh, he loves so ardently! I'd sung only once when I heard thunder rumble and saw dark clouds gathering on the horizon. I ran toward them, knowing Anazar was coming for me. As the clouds came closer, I heard the thundersong of his love:

*When I look at her, love becomes my only power  
Teslit my beloved, Teslit, my shining star!  
When I look at her, I see her soul, clear as spring water  
Teslit my beloved, Teslit, my shining star!*

When we met, he drew me into his arms and I became a rainbow. To this day, my people dance in the rain to celebrate our reunion.

*The End.*

# The Darkest Moon

*Unspecified, Libya*

*Huda*

THE LINE OF men now extends into the street and curves around our house. I can't see them but the snippets of conversation I hear tell me they have come from all over the land, and some from abroad. Yesterday, I even heard someone speaking what sounded like Mandarin. I don't know for sure. The only other time I've heard a person speak Mandarin was when a caravan came through town loaded with silk, spices, and keen-eyed men who noticed much but said little. The men here today have nothing to sell but they are united in one common purpose: to see the miracle for themselves. The girl whose hair now sweeps the ground that once clung to her scalp, refusing to even reach her cheeks. The girl whose dark eyes now shine with the allure of a star-filled night, which once were brown as dirt

and held no mystery. The girl whose black skin made her unworthy, now resplendent, like a sunset. My sister, Ghady.

Most of them are suitors but some are there just for the excitement of it all. Stragglers whose meaningless lives now had some purpose: to catch a glimpse of, and maybe win the hand of “The Brightest Sun” as they call her. Some are learned men, here to study and understand the mystery of her transformation. Some are pilgrims, convinced that Ghady has been possessed by a jinniyeh who can cure whatever ails them or fix whatever is broken in them. Most are wealthy men, willing to pay fortunes to add Ghady to their harems. They start arriving with the dawn and their numbers increase as the sun ascends the sky. The new and hopeful mix with the persistent and plaintive. Young women in their best rida make a point to walk through the street a couple of times a day, hoping to catch the eye of one of the disappointed. I hear the hope in their voices as they talk with the men. Laughing children run up and down the street. Minstrels sing Ghady’s praises and make up songs with the different stories the men tell them of their encounter with Ghady. If anything Ghady tells me is correct, most of them are lies.

Our neighbors don’t care about the noise. They are happy. Even grumpy old Omar, the retired butcher, now cheerfully sells kebabs while his wife Fairouz pours out tea, coffee, and laggmy. A small market has grown on our street with people selling food, drink, and anything they think might interest the people who gather there daily. Ghady told me they sell small figurines of her with flowing black hair and golden skin, and silver talismans of palm trees, crows, and vultures, which they swear will bring them the same luck. I burn with resentment as I listen to them from the window of my room. I don’t leave the house these days.

I found out the hard way that people are just as fascinated – albeit in a different way – with that they deem cursed as with that they deem blessed. When Ghady's skin was black the neighbors treated her and her mother with distant, sometimes reluctant courtesy. After all, their skin was the color Allah had seen fit to give them. It wasn't their fault. With me, they muttered prayers to Allah for protection, cursed my name, and threw stones or rotting fruit at me. My dark skin, fuzzy hair, and blind, white eyes were the result of my mother's wickedness, and punishment for my cruelty. They are not wrong. We were wicked to Ghady and her mother, Asma. That is what makes this all so unbearable.

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Our father must not have known the full story of his own ancestry because when Ghady was born with darker skin than even her own mother's, he and everyone else believed she was proof of Asma's infidelity.

"Were you not ashamed enough to use your black magic on him, servant?" I remember my mother, Hajar, sneering as she cradled me close to her side." You had to bring dishonor to our husband too?"

Asma never responded to my mother's taunts and accusations. She bore the insults and denigration graciously and poured affection on her child. But as Ghady grew, all questions about her parentage changed to questions about our father's parentage. Her dark skin, round face, broad nose, and fuzzy hair were her mother's, but the eyes on either side of that nose and the lips that curved underneath might as well have been plucked from

our father's own face. She grew tall and slender like him, and her voice was a higher-pitched version of his. *What dark threads were woven into the tapestry of our father's ancestry?* People asked. *Which secret had Ghady's birth revealed?* He hated them for it, and I suppose this gave my mother license. She was relentless in her cruelty.

Nothing Asma ever said or did was beyond her criticism. She spoke ill of Asma to anyone who would listen and berated the woman every chance she got. Asma makes delicious kahqa. No one makes the pastry like her. Whether savory or sweet, their crisp brown covers, soft white interiors, and just the perfect amount of sesame seeds sprinkled on made them popular in the markets. Even now, my mouth waters as I think about them. I'd never been able to resist them as a child and Asma was generous. But my mother always seized them from me and threw them to the floor where the dogs would eagerly eat them.

"Her food will make you sick!" she would whisper fiercely, pinching my arm hard enough to make me cry out.

When Asma wasn't present, my mother's ire shifted to Ghady. Ghady was never welcome in our house. We used to play together when we were children... or we tried to. My mother never allowed it. She once found Ghady and I curled up, fast asleep on the cushions in our quarters, exhausted from play and snacking on Asma's kahqa. Her enraged roars and Ghady's frightened shrieks brought Asma running to our door. The woman watched helplessly as my mother shook Ghady and then threw the child to the ground in the courtyard. That had drawn a sharp rebuke from our father, who usually couldn't be bothered to curb my mother's cruelty. Our people say: two wives wreck a man's home. But in our home, the only person doing the wrecking was my mother with her cruelty and my father with his apathy.

Locked up in my room, I constantly think about things I should've done differently in the past. I should've asked Ghady to tell me how she came about her miracle. She would've too. Ghady grew up to be sweet and kind, just like her mother. Her refusal to return the contempt I heaped on her fueled my hatred. I'd easily numbed myself to the hurt and betrayal I saw in her eyes when I would beg for her mother's kahqa and then, after she brought them to me, would let my mother see the pastries and throw them to the dogs. I enjoyed her pained confusion. Still, she always brought me the pastry when I asked and Asma never turned me away when I went to their quarters. Sometimes, I went there to escape my mother's tumultuous moods and eager, hurtful hands. Other times, I went to spy for her and find ammunition she could use against Asma. Eventually Asma grew wary and stopped giving me free rein of their home, but still, she never turned me away.

Ghady remained innocent. She would've told me to give water to the thirsty palm tree when it asked. She would've told me and even shown me how to splint the black crow's broken wing and the vulture's broken leg. She would've told me everything I needed to know to avoid the curse. But if our roles were reversed, I know I wouldn't have told her a thing. My armpits prickle with shameful sweat. Even when I'd come back from my doomed journey, taller than before, with ashy, dark skin, fuzzy hair, and eyes white and blind, Ghady and Asma were the ones who'd stopped the people from casting me out of the village. Ghady insisted I take her room when my mother refused to let me enter her quarters even though it was my mother who, in her jealousy, had insisted I go to the hamlet to find eggs just as Ghady had gone before she came

back transformed. Asma brings me food and water, always remembering to include a few pieces of kahqa. I'd refused to touch the tray of food at first but changed my mind with hunger and the realization that she wouldn't stop bringing food or trying to take care of me. She knows I won't open the door when she begs me to and yet, Ghady sits outside the door of my room every day and tells me about the men who come to see her, and all the gifts they bring. I know she doesn't tell me these things to make me jealous but I burn with envy all the same. Even now, I resent them though I know it is not pity that motivates their actions. That is why when I think to ask for Ghady's help, I don't dismiss the thought right away. I can no longer bear the people's fear and condemnation. I can no longer bear my mother's contempt, or our father's quiet distance. I can't bear Asma's relentless kindness or Ghady's agonizing compassion. I hate myself because they have never hated me. Would Ghady help me now? If she knows how to, would she tell me how to reverse this spell?

### *Ghady*

I have long since lost track of what the man sitting across from me is saying. Hugo Manuel Salazar de Cordoba is a rich Andalusian merchant whose ships sail around the world. He has more money than any one man can possibly use in ten lifetimes. He is a handsome man with a full head of curly, black hair, sun-kissed, olive skin, and beautiful, white teeth that contrast starkly with his full, luxurious beard. His warm, brown eyes twinkle with humor and intelligence when he talks, and he is one of very few men who speak to me like I am a person, not an object to be acquired. Above all, he offers more than riches, he offers knowledge. He is quite the scholar, fluent in

multiple languages and learned in the mysteries of the Greeks, the Jews, the Arabs, the Indians, and even the Chinese. Father nods enthusiastically as he talks, his eyes eagerly cataloging the quality of the man's clothes, the jewels in his rings, and the pile of gifts he has brought. I'd listened to their conversation, completely besotted by his beauty and sophistication, until Mother entered the room with tea, interrupting my daydream of sailing across the Mediterranean back to his castle. I happened to be looking at him as I indulged my fantasy, so I saw the disdain settle across his face like a familiar cloak across his shoulders. I wonder if he remembers that once, I, too, was dark like Mother.

I despise my new form. I despise the glowing, creamy skin, the long hair, the "night sky eyes" as the singers call them. I despise the fascination and obsession I inspire. I despise most of the men who clamor in the streets and ply my parents with gifts and promises. I despise that becoming someone else is what it took to get people to see me as beautiful, and my father to see me as worthy of his time. I would do anything to return to being tall, dark, and unremarkable as everyone says I was. I regret every past moment of insecurity when I'd wished to be Huda who, with her light skin, beautiful eyes, and long hair, was admired. My thoughts wander, as they always do these days, to my sister.

I know her door is locked. I know she won't open it even if I beg. I have begged. I beg every day and she ignores me. But still I go to her. I talk to her. I comfort her and tell her none of this is her fault. Yes, she was cruel, but had she ever learned to be different? With a mother like Hajar, it would've been a miracle if she'd been anything but cruel. And then to have been so callously discarded by Hajar and our father. My heart raged at the injustice of it all. I want to ask her if she wants to try to reverse the spell.

“Don’t speak of such things, Ghady,” my mother admonished when I told her of my desire to help Huda. It was late one night, and we’d been unable to sleep listening to Huda cry in the room next to ours.

“Don’t you see your transformation is a blessing? Repayment from Allah for all our suffering? It is enough that we are kind to her. Be content with your good fortune, child.”

“But how could it be good fortune if it means such terrible suffering for another person, Mother?” I’d asked. “Allah is just. Is He not also merciful and compassionate?”

“To Allah alone belongs the mystery of the heavens and earth, Ghady,” Mother responded. “We must see this as His will and trust that He has some purpose in this.”

I still don’t see it. That is why I am determined to help Huda as soon as I figure out how.

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As always, Huda doesn’t answer when I knock on her door later that evening.

“I’ll eat dinner here this evening,” I announce. “I want to tell you about this Andalusian merchant who came today.” She doesn’t respond so I settle down at the door and pick up my bowl. “Mother made chorba today,” I say. “It’s quite good. I brought you a bowl with some rice. I know you like chorba with rice.” I am a little surprised by the twinge of disappointment I feel when Huda still doesn’t respond. A part of me hopes each day that she will break her silence and open the door, that away from her mother’s poisonous influence we might be sisters again like we were when we were children. It is a vain hope, but I try all the same. Perhaps the kindness I show her will soften her hardened heart.

"So this merchant, he is quite handsome," I start." Rich too, and very learned! His ships go all around the world, and he goes with them sometimes. He might be the only one of them so far who has gone to China! You should've seen father's face when he saw the silk the man brought as gifts." I pause to chew and then continue. "He told us about all the holy men he has studied with. I can't even pretend to understand some of the things he said but Father was extremely impressed and he's the most learned man I know! Father asked him to come back next week when Shaykh Hamaad returns from visiting his relatives."

My voice trails off as I remember why I don't want Hugo Manuel Salazar de Cordoba to return.

"You don't sound like you want him to return."

All breath leaves my lungs when I hear Huda's hoarse voice. I am too stunned to speak for a few moments.

"No," I finally say, my voice rough with emotion. "No, I don't want him to return."

"Why?" Huda asks.

"He—" My words stumble to a halt as I remember how the mow of distaste had settled and remained on Hugo de Cordoba's face as he watched my mother pour tea. How he'd smiled conspiratorially when he noticed my stare. How didn't touch the cup of tea she poured. How he didn't seem to care how insulting his behavior had been, even after Father introduced the person he'd clearly thought was a servant, as my mother. I can't tell Huda that. "He seems cruel," I murmur without elaborating.

"I was cruel to you," Huda says. "And yet, here you are."

"You are my sister, Huda," I say firmly. "And I know the cruel face you showed me is not your real face."

Huda laughs quietly. "Tell me something, Ghady," she says. "If I'd come to you and asked you to tell me the secret

of your transformation, would you have told me? Would you have told me how to avoid this curse?"

"Of course, Huda," I say without hesitation.

"Well, I wouldn't have," Huda retorts angrily. "If our roles were reversed, I wouldn't have told you a thing. I'd have let you go and make whatever mistake you might've made and returned cursed like me."

"You are not cursed, Huda!" I say just as forcefully.

Huda suddenly opens the door and I jump in surprise.

"Ah ya ukhti!" I whisper in dismay, my heart racing as I set my bowl of food down and stand up to face her. She has not bathed in months, and I can smell the musty ripeness of her unwashed skin. Her hair, so different from the silken locks she had before, is matted and tangled. Her face is swollen from crying, her lips are ashy and cracked. She is emaciated, obviously not eating enough to keep up with her distress.

"I'm not cursed, you say?" she asks, her strange, white gaze settling on me even though I know she can't see me. "Tell me what you see then? Do you see a young woman in her prime? Look at me and tell me I'm not cursed! Tell me I'm not the dark moon to your bright sun!"

"I would become the dark moon again," I cry, reaching out to her, but she flinches away when I touch her arm. "If it would make you happy, Huda, if it would bring me back my sister, I would become the darkest moon."

A bitter smile curves her lips. "Then become the darkest moon, Ghady," she sneers. "Help me break this curse."

### *Huda*

Ghady agrees to help me, but she has conditions: I must bathe and eat everyday, and I must spend time outside

in the sun with her or with Asma. When I'm strong enough to travel, we will go back to the palm tree. She doesn't know how to break the curse or how to summon the crow and the vulture, but the palm tree seems like a good place to start. Ghady is ecstatic when I agree. She runs to call her mother but doesn't tell her about our agreement. Asma hugs me close and cries when she sees me. I cling to her, guilt and shame churning my belly. Ghady helps me bathe and brings me fresh clothes.

Asma cleans out my room, throws out the cushions, and replaces them with even softer ones. She opens the windows and burns incense to cleanse and freshen the room. Over the next weeks, they both ply me with food. Asma brings me steaming, flavorful bowls of shakshuka or ikerkoushen with freshly baked crispy bread in the morning. Later in the day, she sends Ghady with bazin, marag with spiced lamb and rice pilaf, or couscous heaped with vegetables, and always a few pieces of kahqa. Ghady takes care of my hair. I have no clue what to do with the soft, tight curls, but she partitions them into sections, rubs argan oil into them, and braids them into a style that feels tight but comfortable.

"It suits you so well," she enthuses, forgetting herself for a moment. "I wish you could see!"

"I don't," I reply tartly, then try and fail to ignore my guilt when she gasps softly. "You shouldn't let me, or anyone else, be so cruel to you, Ghady," I chide gently.

"Most people are not cruel to me," she replies. "Of course, they aren't!" I snort. "You are the *Brightest Sun* now."

"No..." she says. "I mean in general, even before I changed. Most people weren't cruel to me or my mother, to people like us."

"I remember how they treated you, Ghady."

"Yes," she agrees. "But they are just confused."

I turn unseeing eyes in her direction, an eyebrow raised incredulously. I can't believe her naivete.

"Confused?" I ask. "How so?"

"Yes, confused," she reaffirms assuredly. "They are confused because they think that since they don't have dark skin like us, their lives should be better, they should be happier, more successful, more loved. But that isn't what happens. When they see us happy, content with what we have, loving ourselves and loving each other, despite what they think is our misfortune, it confuses them. So they try to create the reality they think should exist by being unkind to us. When that doesn't work, either, they are even more cruel. But they don't realize that they are only increasing their own suffering, and we live our lives either way, with nothing staining our conscience."

She is not wrong. It had confused and enraged me that Ghady and Asma never took the bait and let themselves be goaded into retaliating when my mother and I were cruel. It had also taken considerable effort to numb my conscience. But I'd also enjoyed the power I had to hurt and humiliate them, and I know there are people, like my mother, who feel more pleasure than confusion at their cruelty.

Tears of rage well up in my eyes when I think about my mother.

"You are right," I say, wiping the tears away with shaking hands. "But there are also people who feel no confusion and have no conscience. People who will feel nothing as they watch you suffer and die."

"I know," Ghady says softly. A few moments later, her arms wrap around me. "I know."

My mother doesn't come to Asma's quarters, so I'm spared her company. I can hear her voice sometimes, menacing, and shrill as she talks to the servants. The sound makes me rub my arms, soothing away the memory of her pinching fingers.

She doesn't ask about me. She never mentions me. It is as if I have stopped existing to her.

Ghady still has to receive visitors. The Andalusian merchant returns and leaves upset when Ghady rejects his offer of marriage. We find out later that the men on the street had placed bets, many of them convinced that he would succeed in winning Ghady's hand. She is furious when she hears and refuses to see anyone for days. Father tries to force her but then relents when Asma reminds him that the men haven't come to see a miserable woman.

"Let the girl rest," Asma encourages. "Let her take care of her sister. They have been spending time together and Huda is eating and laughing."

Father treats me with the same distant and negligent concern he had for Ghady before her transformation. As he did with her, he acts as if my existence is evidence that something is not quite right with him. I can't muster the wherewithal to hate him. My mother has a monopoly on my hate.

### *Ghady*

There is no moon the night we decide to go look for the palm tree. We easily blend into the shadows as we slip out of the house and make our way through the village to the road that leads to the hamlet where the chicken farms are. I never told anyone which of the wells on that road has the palm tree that started the chain of events that led to my transformation.

"Someone would've cut it down by now," I explain when Huda asks me why.

"Or monopolized the water at the well," she adds, nodding in agreement. Our progress is slow. We don't bring a lamp so we only have the dim light of the spray of stars overhead.

With Huda unable to see, it is like the blind leading the blind. It takes a while but finally we arrive at the palm tree. There is no breeze, but it sways gently, the sound of its rustling leaves loud in the quiet night. We stand near it for a few moments, unsure what to do. I pick up the bucket and then squeak in alarm when the tree speaks.

“You don’t need to help me quench a thirst I don’t feel tonight, young woman.”

I set the bucket down and bow my head.

“No, Mother,” I agree. “But a supplicant who brings an offering stands a better chance of being heard.”

“Indeed,” the tree says, and I hear the approving note in her tone. “What is your request?”

“That my sister be healed of her affliction. That length be in her hair, not her stature.” I repeat the words Huda told me the tree had spoken to her. The night is suddenly silent as the tree stops swaying and its leaves stop rustling. My heart thudding in my chest, I reach out, seeking Huda’s hand, and I find her hand seeking mine too. The silence stretches for what feels like an eternity and Huda and I wait, holding hands. We both look up when we hear a caw and the swoosh of flapping wings. Even in the poor light, I can see the crow and the vulture as they fly in and land on the tree.

“Length in stature, dusky skin.” The contempt in the vulture’s voice is unmistakable. “Blind eyes, heart ugly with sin!”

Huda stiffens next to me. I squeeze her hand until she relaxes.

“Length in hair, sunset skin,” the crow squawks admiringly. “Night sky eyes, pure heart within.”

“Yes, my brother, Crow,” I say. “And still I would gladly take back my short hair and earth-brown eyes and skin if it means an end to my sister’s suffering.”

The crow, tree, and vulture are silent for a long time.

“Your request is sincere.” The tree speaks first. She sounds surprised. “You would give up your good fortune, your beauty, your wealth of suitors, all these things you fervently wished to have, just to end her suffering. You would do this even though she has been nothing but cruel to you.”

“Even though,” the vulture cackles, “just now, she burned with resentment when we spoke of you.”

“Even though her fate is the result of her own actions,” the crow adds, “a manifestation of her deepest fear – to become like you! And the blindness is consequence of her own wickedness.”

“Yes,” I agree. “Even though everything I have become is what I had wished for and what she has become is what she feared.”

They are silent again, so Huda and I wait.

“We can’t refuse the request of a pure heart,” the tree says finally. She doesn’t sound pleased.

“But we can place conditions around the request,” the vulture adds.

“I’ll do anything you ask me to,” I say, hope igniting in my chest.

“Not you,” the crow squawks. “Her.”

“Me?” Huda asks, a tremor in her voice. She lifts her unseeing eyes to the tree.

“Yes, you,” the tree says. “We will lift your curse on one condition. You will be unfailingly kind to your sister. If you fail, she will go blind just as you are now blind.”

“I agree to your conditions!” I shout before Huda can refuse. I feel more than hear her gasp.

“Ghady... no!” she cries, wresting her hand from mine. “I can’t promise that.”

“Yes, you can,” I insist. “You must because I want you to be happy again and I’d really rather be myself again. If I have

to go back to listening to all those men, I'll stab someone with father's dagger."

"I don't know how to be kind, Ghady!" Huda wails.

"You only have to be kind to me!" I soothe. "That is what she said. You only have to be kind to me. Right, Mother?" I look up at the tree.

The vulture screeches and the crow squawks in what sounds like laughter.

"Those were, indeed, my words," the palm tree agrees. She sounds amused. I turn to back to Huda and take her hand again. "You see? You only have to be kind to me."

"How can I be kind to you and cruel to everyone else?" Huda asks.

"She still doesn't understand," the vulture says impatiently.

"No," the tree says sadly.

"She doesn't." The crow squawks but says nothing more.

"You must be kind to your sister," the tree explains gently. "And by so doing, you will learn to be kind to other people."

"If you can learn to be kind to her," the vulture adds, "you can learn to be kind to other people."

I take Huda's other hand as the vulture speaks. She is shaking her head, her white eyes wide with fear, tears streaming down her face.

"Don't be afraid, Huda. You can do it!"

"No, Ghady. I'll fail you."

"You won't fail me, Huda. You can't fail me. I know you, remember? I've known you all my life."

"I have never been good to you, Ghady. Even when we played together as children, I hated you."

"You were a child copying the behavior of your mother," I say gently, stroking her face. "Don't blame yourself for your mother's failures."

“Forgive me, sister!” Huda wails and flings her arms around me.

“I forgive you, Huda,” I say, holding her tightly, letting my own tears flow. “I forgive you.”

We cling to each other and cry. We don’t look up when we hear flapping wings. A breeze blows across where we are standing and the night settles into stillness once again. When we separate from our hug, I stare into Huda’s beautiful, dark eyes and wipe the tears from her creamy, ruddy cheeks.

“Come,” I say. “Let’s go home.”

*The End*



# Songkanngh's Children

*Bafanji, Cameroon*

KENOWEH PEERED IN dismay at the bottle in her hand. The light from the small lamp she carried was dim, but she could tell from its weight that the container was barely half full. She poured the contents into the large jug sitting in the mud next to her, then picked it up to assess its weight. The jug seemed no heavier than when it was empty which meant she was nowhere close to the amount of palm wine she'd promised her uncle, Pa Mbizih, in return for the last bit of money she needed to buy a bicycle. Pa Mbizih had agreed to the deal as a concession to his relationship with Kenoweh's mother.

"Your father has put you in a difficult situation, Keno," the older man had said to her with a gentle smile, "but you still have people. Try not to forget that." Kenoweh frowned as her thoughts shifted to her father. Papa had gone from being one of the most prolific palm wine tappers in Bwangi, to mostly drinking the palm wine Kenoweh tapped, and half heartedly tending to the farm near their compound where

they grew melons and peppers for sale. This was a reversal from the man Kenoweh remembered from when she was younger. Back then, Papa's big, gap-toothed smile was a near constant white slash through the thick beard on his face. He rarely ever touched the wine he tapped, eager as he'd been to make as much money as he could. Nothing was too good for his wife, two daughters, and newborn son.

Then, three years ago, when Kenoweh was ten years old, death laughed at her father's ambitions and casually plucked away her mother, sister, and infant brother as they returned to the village from Mendan where her mother sometimes went to sell dried catfish. Only eight of the thirty people crammed into the big truck survived the accident. The vehicles reduced the trip to Mendan from a day-long walk to a six-hour drive, so they remained popular even though it meant an uncomfortable and often dangerous journey on dusty roads which turned into mud-slick, death-dealing paths when it rained. Papa had started drinking during the burial rites and hadn't stopped since.

Still frowning, Kenoweh scraped away curdled wine and other debris from the hole she'd made in the central base of the raphia palm. Thinking about her father always filled her with helpless rage so she focused her attention on her work, willing her mind away from the painful memories. She had to cut further into the palm's fibrous stalk and then insert the bamboo pipe which would funnel the plant's sap into her bottle. She made the cut with quick, efficient movements and then used more force than was probably necessary to jam the pipe in. The tree shuddered as if in protest, and Kenoweh hummed soothingly. She covered the bottle with leaves, picked up her lamp, and stood up from her crouched position, wincing at the twinge of pain in her back. A long stretch, made even longer by the deep breath she took to steady herself, eased her aching body. The wet, earthy smell of the nguo – the raphia palm swamp

from which people tapped palm wine-mixed with the cold morning air flooding her lungs. It was a familiar and comforting scent. She looked around the nguo and started walking in the direction of the next raphia palm tree on her route. This place, with its thickets of raphia palms surrounded by what felt like every kind of grass and leafy plant in the world, belonged to her. Well, it belonged to Papa but as first-born daughter, the land would become hers. It was already hers, for all intents and purposes, given how little attention Papa paid it. She had land of her own which she inherited from her mother but most of it was useless since it extended into the chunh. Chunhs were a different kind of swamp than nguos. They were much boggier and spotted with small patches of seemingly dryland into which a person could sink and never be seen again. Nobody tapped the raphia trees in certain parts of the chunh unless they wanted to feed their friends and relatives, not their families. It was a joke Papa used to make, alluding to the people who would need to be entertained at a funeral. He also used to joke that Bwangi's blood flows white. Bwangi wine was still the most requested palm wine for events as far away as Afang and Ngante, a whole week's walk away. Kenoweh was happy to assume her father's position as one of the palm wine tappers in the village. It was good work even if it meant she had to start waking up earlier each morning for the hour-long walk to the nguo. By the time she finished checking the trees on her various routes and collecting the palm wine, hints of yellow in the dawn sky were already delivering on their promise of a sweltering day. She usually dripped with sweat when she arrived at the chunh to check her catfish traps after going to the market to give the palm wine to her stepmother, Ma Whindiah. Then she hurried home so she could prepare any catfish she caught for smoking, eat whatever was left over from what Ma Whindiah ate that morning, and try to finish the farm work Papa was often too

drunk to finish. On those evenings, she walked back to the nguo to retrieve whatever palm wine had collected during the day. This was why Kenoweh had started siphoning off some wine to quietly sell to private buyers like Pa Mbizih. She needed a bicycle. It was such an obvious solution to her problem the realization had startled a laugh out of her. Bicycles were still new to the village, but they were already popular among wealthy men. Papa would certainly own one too if he'd not gone looking for solace in palm wine jugs. A bicycle meant no more walking from the nguo to the market carrying heavy jugs of palm wine. A bicycle would also shorten the early morning walk from their compound to the nguo. She dreaded this walk because it went past the chunh which spread across the middle of their village. The expanse of mist-covered, swampland had a presence of its own which the people called Songkanngoh, the swamp's spirit, or nueh. Her mother used to tell her stories about the stubborn children Songkanngoh captured. The eerily quiet swamp filled her heart with fear.

Already sweating lightly, she arrived at the next tree on her route and found a good spot to place the lamp before squatting in front of the tree to push aside the leaves covering the bottle. A satisfied grunt rumbled deep in her chest when she saw that it was so full of palm wine, the white liquid leaked out past the bamboo pipe. She carefully extracted the bottle and poured its contents into the jug and then repeated the process of scraping away debris and curdled wine, cutting more into the stalk and inserting the bamboo pipe with the bottle attached. After covering the bottle, she rose to her feet and looked up at the sprawling branches of the palm tree. It was a good tree. She'd only begun tapping it a week ago and so far, it hadn't yet disappointed her. She might be able to give Pa Mbizih his wine after all. Feeling a little better about her prospects, she offered a small prayer of gratitude

to the trees' nueh and picked up the now noticeably heavier jug to continue on her way. The sky was already streaked with yellow, and Ma Whindiah expected her to be at the market with the wine when she arrived. Normally, this wouldn't be a problem but today she would be carrying three jugs instead of two. Thankfully, Pa Mbizih's house was near the market. A small bubble of elation formed in Kenoweh's belly. She would finally be getting her bicycle. She would still have to explain how she got it, but surely Ma Whindiah and Papa would see the advantage to owning one.

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It was predictably busy when Kenoweh arrived at the market carrying two jugs of palm wine. The dimly lit market square smelled of the tomatoes farmers had come early to sell to traders headed to Mendar, Bofou, and other nearby towns. As the day progressed, the acrid smell of freshly harvested tomatoes would mix with the smell of raw meat and burning hair when the butchers started preparing freshly slaughtered cows for sale. The scent of food, palm wine, and dust would eventually join the mix as more traders, customers, and other people who used the market as a gathering spot arrived. The door to Ma Whindiah's small shed was open and Kenoweh noted that Papa had still not fixed the sagging roof. She could see Ma Whindiah inside, looking through a pile of smoked fish with a frown on her face. Anombie, the baby, slept in a basket next to her.

"O'zouo, Ma Whindiah," Kenoweh said in greeting. The woman looked up and her frown deepened.

"You've finally arrived," she sneered, ignoring Kenoweh's greeting. "What took you so long?"

"I had to check many different trees today," Kenoweh replied, telling but not quite telling the truth. She set the jugs on the ground and turned to leave.

"Is that all you have?" Ma Whindiah asked, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. Kenoweh's heart skipped a beat. Had Ma Whindiah seen the other jug? She breathed slowly to stay calm.

"Yes, some of the trees are not producing much. That is why I had to check more of them. I'll go back today and start new ones." Her stepmother said nothing, so Kenoweh turned again to leave.

"Are you sure that is all the wine you have, Kenoweh?" Ma Whindiah asked again. Kenoweh's heart sank at the oily malice in the woman's tone. She knew something.

"That is all the wine I have for you, Ma Whindiah," she said carefully. "Two jugs as usual."

"Then how do you explain this?" Ma Whindiah reached into a corner of Anombie's basket and pulled out a wad of carefully folded bank notes. "If two jugs of wine are all you have for me as usual, how do you explain this? Where have you been stealing money from?"

Kenoweh stared at the money in dismay, her dream of a bicycle disappearing.

"I haven't been stealing, Ma," she said quietly. "It's money I gathered to buy a bicycle."

"Money you gathered from where?" Ma Whindiah insisted.

Kenoweh looked around the shed. There were several mounds of melons and five large containers of peppers. There were also pots of food which Ma Whindiah sold in addition to the dried fish and palm wine Kenoweh brought. She sold palm wine at a premium to the traders who descended on Bwangi's market early in the morning like flies on uncovered food. She kept all the money for herself and the baby. She grudgingly gave Papa a few bank notes when he asked and gave Kenoweh

nothing at all. She had more than enough money for anything she wanted. Why couldn't she let her have this one thing that would make all their lives better? Ma Whindiah's resentments about Papa's failures felt like too-tight seams on their family garment. Nobody could sit comfortably. She expected Kenoweh to do for her what Papa was unable to do and flew into a rage when she didn't get her way. Those were the days Kenoweh stayed away from the compound until Ma Whindiah was asleep, her anger no longer a storm raging on their compound alone while surrounding compounds settled into peaceful rest.

"Money you've been gathering from where, Kenoweh?" Ma Whindiah repeated her question testily, interrupting Kenoweh's despairing thoughts.

"From some wine that I have been selling," Kenoweh muttered miserably.

"Where did the wine come from?" Ma Whindiah pressed even though she knew the answer.

"From the nguo," Kenoweh replied.

"So, you've been hiding some of the wine you tap when you're supposed to bring me everything."

"You told me you wanted two jugs every morning," Kenoweh replied evenly.

"Yes!" Ma Whindiah shouted. "That's because you told me that you could only bring me two jugs!" Her angry words ended with an explosive surge of motion as she rose from her seated position and crossed the space between them to slap Kenoweh so hard she stumbled out of the shed with a startled cry. "Wicked child!" Ma Whindiah followed her into the open, still shouting. "You know we need money since your useless father has refused to work! Who do you think you are to own a bicycle?"

"I need the bicycle so I can move around faster!" Kenoweh protested, cradling her numb jaw. "I have to go to the nguo

then come here, then go to the chunh for fish, and then go to the house. It is a lot of walking!"

"And have you died from the walking?" Ma Whindiah asked, taking a threatening step toward her. Kenoweh scuttled away.

"No, but I am tired all the time and my body hurts!"

"Soft pikin for strong country!" Ma Whindiah sniggered. "Let this be the last time you steal money from me!" She spoke loud enough so people nearby heard.

"I didn't steal money from you!" Kenoweh shouted back, hating the quiver in her voice which betrayed the impotence of her rage. "That is my money that I worked with my own hands!"

"It is my money," Ma Whindiah retorted, clapping her hands in annoyance. "Your father told you to bring all the wine you tap to me. So, if you don't bring it, you are stealing from me!"

"Ma Whindiah, na weti di happen?" Mami Bonuoh, the woman whose stall adjoined Ma Whindiah's, walked over to where Kenoweh stood.

"This bad luck pikin has been stealing wine to sell!" Ma Whindiah exclaimed.

"Kenoweh, is it true what she is saying?" Mami Bonuoh asked, alarmed.

"I didn't steal the wine, Mami Bonuoh!" Kenoweh replied. "I tapped extra wine so I could sell it and buy a bicycle."

Understanding and subtle approval softened Mami Bonuoh's face. The older woman turned to Ma Whindiah.

"Weh," she pleaded gently, "the pikin no take your money, Ma Whindiah."

"E Papa tell e for bring me all wine wey e tap am!" Ma Whindiah insisted shrilly. Mami Bonuoh said nothing, knowing Ma Whindiah wasn't going to be reasonable.

"You don take your money back," she conceded. "No beat the pikin. Kenoweh, next time ask your Papa and e woman for money if you need am, you done hear?"

"Yes!" Ma Whindiah crowed triumphantly. "Next time ask us for money. No begin di behave like thief man."

Angry tears threatened to scald a path down Kenoweh's cheeks. But she couldn't let Ma Whindiah see her cry, so she turned and walked away from the shed, headed in the direction of the jug of palm wine she'd hidden. This setback had only made her more determined. She would continue selling wine on the side and she would start selling catfish too. She could hide the money away from the house where Ma Whindiah wouldn't find it. This time she wasn't just going to buy a bicycle. She was going to leave the house first and go stay with her mother's people. Then she would build herself a small house on her mother's land. Papa could stay with his new family and their troubles.

The jug was still in the bushes where she stashed it, so she took it to Pa Mbizih as promised. She found the man sitting on the small veranda of his house, chewing on a guava twig.

"Kenoweh! Have you brought that our thing?" he asked, smiling conspiratorially.

"I brought it, Pa," Kenoweh replied sullenly, setting the jug down before him. Pa Mbizih gave her a puzzled look.

"Na weti? Are you not happy to buy your bicycle?"

"I can't buy the bicycle now, Pa," Kenoweh muttered miserably.

"Ah, ah! You be tell me sey na the last remaining money this wey you need am noh?"

"Ma Whindiah took the other money."

"E take am why?" Pa Mbizih asked, outraged.

"E say I be get to give e any extra wine wey I tap am because Papa be don talk sey make I give e all thing wey I tap am."

Anger hardened Pa Mbizih's face, but he knew that Ma Whindiah's cruelty thrived under her father's neglect. "Weh, Kenoweh," he said, his voice gruff with sympathy. "You want make we cam talk for them?"

Kenoweh knew the “we” Pa Mbizih referred to was her mother’s family. She also knew that their intervention would only make Ma Whindiah more vindictive, so she shook her head no. To her mother’s family, overwhelmed with the weight of their loss, Papa was a reminder of things they wished to forget. Meanwhile, Papa’s family avoided him. Their shame about who Papa had become crowded out any concern they might’ve had. There had been an attempt at an intervention a year after the accident. A traditional healer performed rites intended to drive away the bad spirits that haunted Papa. Things had seemed to get better. Papa stopped drinking and started tapping wine and setting fish traps again. When he showed interest, Ma Whindiah had been eager to marry him, thinking perhaps that she would live the life of a rich palm wine tapper’s wife. Then one day, Kenoweh had come home to find Papa passed out drunk in the yard of their compound. He reeked of afofo, the fermented, distilled, and much stronger palm wine preferred by people for whom fresh palm wine had no more appeal. Kenoweh had silently helped him into the house and onto his bed. The next morning, he hadn’t risen from bed to tap wine or trap fish. He was still in his room when Kenoweh returned from checking the bottles. He remained in his room for the next two days. When he did finally emerge, it was to ask Kenoweh if there was any palm wine left over from what had been sold. Kenoweh handed him the bottle and left the house. A few days later, Ma Whindiah moved into their compound and Anombie was born not long after. Papa’s people stopped visiting after that.

“No need, Pa. I go sell wine and fish for gather the money again but I no go leave am for house this time.”

“Yes. Do am so. I fit keep am for you, you don hear? And I go continue buy wine and fish from you.”

“Yes, Pa,” Kenoweh sighed in relief

"You sure sey you no want make we cam talk for your Papa and Ma Whindiah?" Pa Mbizih's voice was gentle. Kenoweh gave him her best reassuring smile.

"I sure Pa," she said. "I don already decide weti I go do. I want go stay with Big Mami them."

"Kenoweh, Kenoweh! You are taking your hardships like a grown woman," Pa Mbizih said, his voice warm with admiration. "Your mother would be so proud."

Pride swelled Kenoweh's chest at her uncle's words, but it was followed by a throbbing sadness. She didn't want to be a grown woman just yet. She missed her mother. She missed her sister and baby brother. The tears from earlier threatened to return but she willed them away furiously.

"I am trying, Pa," she said instead.

"Try your best my child," Pa Mbizih encouraged. He dug into the chest pocket of his shirt, pulled out the money he owed Kenoweh, and counted it out so she could see that it was the complete amount. "This is your money. I go keep am for you as we talk."

"Thank you, Pa!" Kenoweh murmured. The sight of the money eased the ache in her chest. She still had something.

"They say Mbombi doesn't give people more than they can bear," Pa Mbizih continued, "so be strong, my child."

The adage was one Kenoweh had heard multiple times since the accident. She had concluded that people didn't know what they were talking about if they could say such a thing when Papa was barely able to move under the weight of his grief. There were times when she prayed and asked Mbombi why her burden was so heavy. Wasn't it enough that Mama, Nkandieh, and Chupeh died? Why did Papa have to be too lost in grief to remember that he still had a child he owed love and care? Why did she have to have a stepmother like Ma Whindiah? She no longer allowed herself to dwell on

those painful thoughts. She was still alive, so she was going to make the best of the situation, even if that meant she had to abandon Papa.

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Kenoweh felt better after talking with Pa Mbizih but the lingering pain from Ma Whindiah's slap was a bitter reminder of what she had lost that morning. No longer numb, her jaw pulsed with each step she took toward the chunh. She walked slowly, alternately fuming and furiously planning her future escape. It was well into the morning when she arrived at the point where the road crossed the swamp. She stopped to contemplate the expanse of boggy land. It looked different in the daylight. Elephant grass and thick clusters of raphia palms dotted its otherwise smooth gleaming surface which sometimes bubbled where catfish and tilapia swam underneath. Kenoweh stepped off the road into the grass bordering the swamp and made her way toward her fish traps. The ground squelched as she walked, which meant the water levels were rising as the dry season gave way to the rainy season. Within the next two months, overflow from the Mendjing dam would flood the area. The path on which she now walked would be covered with water making fishing or any other activities in the area impossible, which was well and good. The overflow almost always brought parasites that filled the fish's bellies with worms.

*Songkannghoh is here.*

Startled, Kenoweh looked to her right where the whispered words seemed to come from. The swamp stretched out, glittering tranquilly in the sunlight. Kenoweh inhaled deeply and chuckled to herself. She really had to get over her fear of the swamp's nueh. In her mother's stories, Songkannghoh only

attacked stubborn children. He was, on the other hand, helpful to children with wicked stepmothers, and sheltered the ones who ran away from home, turning them into mihng-nueh, his spirit children. Mihng-nueh lived with Songkannghoh in the swamp. They rarely showed themselves to humans but they were all too happy to feast on anyone foolish enough to drown in the swamp. Her mother had told many stories of the half-eaten bodies that were sometimes retrieved from the swamp after people, usually children, disappeared. Those stories had scared her the most, but Mama always laughed and assured her that only stubborn children had to worry about Songkannghoh. She arrived at her first catfish trap with memories of her mother and grief squeezing the breath from her lungs. She waded into the swamp toward the basket trap and was almost thigh-deep when she reached it. The water level had risen significantly in the last day. It had barely topped her knees when she set the trap a day ago. She removed the vines which held the trap in place and smiled happily when the basket rocked in the swamp's still water. The movement meant there were fish inside. She lifted the basket, sat it up vertically and peered into its muddy depths. Two large toads stared back at her, their beady eyes bright in the basket's dark interior. A frustrated howl bubbled up and out of Kenoweh before she could stop it. The tears she'd been fighting all morning followed. Standing in the warm, humid waves of air the chunh emitted as the sun rose, she wept for herself and the cruelty she had to endure daily from Ma Whindiah. She wept for the lost dream of a bicycle. She wept for her mother, her dead brother and sister, and her father, who might as well be dead for all the care he showed toward her or his own life.

“Why are you crying?”

The question was asked by a girl's voice, but it came from the direction of the swamp. Kenoweh looked up and around

quickly, immediately concerned for the child's safety. The girl's head poked out from the water but the rest of her body, neck to feet, was submerged. Unless she was very tall for her age, there was no way her feet reached the bottom of the part of the swamp where she stood.

"What are you doing in there?" Kenoweh asked, wiping away her tears. "Come out before you drown!"

The girl said nothing, staring at Kenoweh with solemn, brown eyes, her face completely devoid of any emotion.

"Do you need help?" Kenoweh asked, taking a careful step toward the girl with her hand held out. Her face still expressionless, the girl moved away, her body gliding deeper into the swamp faster than any human could move naturally in water. Kenoweh gaped at the child in shocked incomprehension.

"Why are you crying?" the girl asked again from where she floated. Kenoweh's gaze fixated on her mouth and the small, sharp, yellowish teeth that showed as she spoke. With a shout, she turned to wade out of the swamp to safety but stopped in her tracks, her heart slamming painfully against her ribs. Her path was blocked by a little boy, wearing nothing but a mud-covered pair of shorts. He looked younger than the girl and the earthy slush on his body suggested that he had recently been in the swamp. Kenoweh could even see brown bits of rotten grass in his hair.

"I told you we should leave her alone, Azi," the boy looked past Kenoweh as he spoke. "Now she's afraid of us."

Kenoweh turned around and found, to her horror, that the girl was now standing in the water directly behind her. Her dress, the color of which may have once been red or pink, was also mud-covered and she had bits of rotted grass and other vegetation in her hair.

"Of course, she's afraid, Nteh," the girl's eyes remained on Kenoweh. "She has never seen one of us before."

A predatory gleam lit her eyes, accelerating the thundering

beat of Kenoweh's heart. The gleam was gone almost as soon as she noticed it, replaced by the girl's blank stare from earlier.

"Why were you crying?"

"What are you people?" The girl and Kenoweh spoke at the same time and then fell silent, each waiting for the other to respond.

"We live here," the boy said from behind Kenoweh, breaking the silence. Heart still racing, Kenoweh turned to look at him.

"Here where?" she asked, her voice wobbly.

"Here," Nteh gestured in the direction of the swamp. "This is our home."

"You're lying. You can't live in there." Kenoweh shook her head, her mind refusing to accept what she was hearing. "It's the chunh. You will drown."

"I'm not lying!" There was childish defiance in Nteh's voice. "Songkanngoh says we should never tell lies."

Fear and shock finally overwhelmed Kenoweh. She stumbled past Nteh to dry land and sat down in the grass. The girl, Azi, drifted over to where Nteh was, took his arm, and gently pulled him away from the bank. They both watched Kenoweh from where they floated in the water.

"Songkanngoh?" Kenoweh asked, her voice trembling.

"Yes," Nteh replied. "He takes care of us."

"But... but Songkanngoh is a..." Kenoweh couldn't bring herself to say the word aloud.

"A nueh," Azi supplied, a hint of impatience in her voice. "We are mihng-nueh."

Kenoweh cringed as all the stories her mother had ever told her about mihng-nueh came rushing back. Visions of half-eaten, dead bodies danced across her mind.

"Why were you crying?" Azi repeated her question again. Her voice was softer, kinder, as if she'd sensed Kenoweh's fear and was trying to calm her down. "You sounded sad. That's

why we came to talk to you. You don't have to be afraid of us. We won't do anything to you."

Kenoweh looked up at them, still too afraid to speak. Azi smiled reassuringly. She didn't show her teeth.

"We can't even do anything to you," Nteh said from next to her. "We can only eat things that have already died."

"Shut up, Nteh!" Azi hissed, slapping the back of his head

With her open palm. He yelled in pain and drifted away from her. "But it is true!" he protested. "And she won't be afraid if she knows we can't do anything to her. I'll report you to Songkannghoh for hitting me."

"You talk too much," Azi said.

"No, I don't!" Nteh bristled with indignation.

"Yes, you do!" Azi shot back. Kenoweh's fear battled her curiosity as she watched them bickering. They seemed more interested in each other than in her. She wondered if she could run away as they argued. But they lived in the swamp she depended on for fish.

"I was crying because my trap didn't catch any fish." She spoke loud enough to be heard over their arguing and, as she spoke, realized that she had decided to befriend them. They both turned to look at her. Then Azi smiled a brilliant smile which lit up her face and displayed her sharp, yellow teeth.

"That's all you were crying so much about?" Her tone was slightly mocking, and Kenoweh felt her defenses rise.

"We can help you with that!" Nteh said enthusiastically, also smiling happily.

"That's not all I was crying about," Kenoweh added, keen to defend herself. "It's also that my stepmother took the money that I had worked for to buy a bicycle with."

The smiles faded from Azi and Nteh's faces.

"Your stepmother?" Azi asked, her voice low and resonant with some dark emotion.

"Azi..." Nteh murmured, looking at her nervously.

"Yes," Kenoweh replied, wondering about Azi's sudden mood change and Nteh's nervousness.

"Does she do that often?" Azi asked, her tone eerily adult and deceptively calm.

"Azi..." Nteh murmured again before cringing from the menacing glare she settled on him.

"No, today was the first time," Kenoweh explained, shifting nervously from foot to foot. "But she is a wicked woman. She doesn't like me at all."

"They never do," Azi muttered darkly. "When did your real mother die?" Her tone turned gentle, and it was sympathy Kenoweh now saw in her eyes.

"Three years ago. She was in an accident with my little brother and sister."

"They died too?" Azi's eyes widened. Kenoweh nodded sadly.

"Weh! Ashia..." Azi paused and frowned. "What is your name?"

"My name is Kenoweh".

"Ashia, Kenoweh."

"Ashia, Kenoweh." Nteh echoed.

"Thank you. I miss them very much."

"I understand," Azi said. Kenoweh believed her. Azi looked around the swamp and then looked back at Kenoweh. "We can help you with the fish if you give us your trap."

Kenoweh hesitated. There had to be a rule about accepting help from nueh, but she couldn't remember anything specific to mihng-nueh, and the legends always said Songkanngoh took care of children with wicked stepmothers.

"Thank you!" She acquiesced. Nteh whooped with joy and darted over to where Kenoweh's trap had sunk into the swamp. She gasped when the little boy disappeared under the water, and then her eyes bulged when he returned to the surface,

hoisting the trap over his head and laughing triumphantly. The trap wasn't light when dry and it was even heavier when soaked with water. Azi noticed her surprise.

"We are very strong," she explained. "Wait for us here."

Kenoweh nodded and watched Azi glide over to where Nteh was. She took the basket from him and together they glided out toward the deep part of the swamp and sank under the surface. Kenoweh held her breath, trying to gauge how long they could stay underwater without air. She gulped in a breath not too long after and carefully searched the surface of the swamp to see if she might detect their movements. It remained placid, gleaming in the sun. Finally, she gave up, closed her eyes, and let herself contemplate what she had just witnessed. Was it real or had she just imagined it all? As if to answer her question, she heard a swoosh of movement in the swamp and opened her eyes to see Azi and Nteh gliding toward her. This time Azi carried the basket and from where she sat, Kenoweh could hear the wet slap of fishes flopping around inside.

"We caught as many as we could," Azi set the trap down in the shallow water. Kenoweh waded over to them and looked into the trap. It was full of fish.

"Thank you! All my traps couldn't catch this many fish in one day!"

"We can help you with your other traps too."

"No, that will be too much. I'm not the only one who catches fish here."

Azi's admiring look unfurled a bloom of happiness in Kenoweh.

"Anytime you need help you can come here and call us," Azi smiled. "We'll help you catch fish."

She waved and sank back into the swamp. Nteh waved and followed his sister. After they disappeared from sight,

Kenoweh looked down at the fish. She definitely hadn't imagined any of it. There was also no need to check her other traps since the bag she brought with her could only carry so many fish. She dragged the basket out to the bank and set about removing the fish from the basket and preparing them for transportation. There were so many! Big, fat ones too which were sure to bring in a decent price at the market. She was going to keep the biggest fish for Pa Mbizih and her other customers. That thought cheered Kenoweh up. Suddenly things didn't seem as bleak. Maybe Mbombi had finally heard her prayers. Maybe her burden was going to get lighter from today.

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Mbombi must've really seen her suffering because when Kenoweh returned to the nguo the next morning, every single one of her bottles overflowed with palm wine. She filled the jugs for Ma Whindiah and added an extra jug to allay any suspicions the woman might have. She also saved a jug for Pa Mbizih who, the previous evening, had sent word through one of Kenoweh's cousins asking for more wine. Eager to return to the chunh and see her new friends, Kenoweh went through her routine faster than usual. She'd thought about them all day yesterday, her curiosity bubbling like freshly tapped wine. How did they breathe underwater? What did they eat? No human bodies had been found near the chunh recently and no one in the village or any of the nearby villages had gone missing. How long had they been in the chunh? Would they remain children forever? What was life with Songkanngoh like? What did they do during the daytime? Did they ever bathe? Did they sleep at night like normal humans? Where

did they sleep if they did? Did Songkanngoh sing songs and tell them stories? Kenoweh tried to imagine the nueh singing Nchambo Nchah, a lullaby her mother used to sing to her. The thought was so ridiculous, it made her laugh aloud and startle some creature hiding in the bushes nearby. She went to Pa Mbizih's compound to drop off his wine and then, reluctantly, went to the market. Ma Whindiah was in her shed when Kenoweh arrived at the market. She nodded in satisfaction when she saw the extra jug of wine.

"I put some corn out for you to scratch. Make sure you scratch it all and bring it here. I want to grind it. You'll have to come back and help me carry things to the house in the evening." She gave the instructions as if she didn't know that Kenoweh had to check the catfish traps or how far the distance was between the house and the market.

"I'll bring it to you after I scratch it," Kenoweh said, already tired. "But I have to go and check the trees again this evening. You can leave the corn here and I'll take it with me tomorrow morning."

"I'm grinding the corn to cook fufu that I'll sell tomorrow morning."

Kenoweh sighed, resigned at Ma Whindiah's brittle tone. If the trees continued flowing the way they flowed the previous night, the wine would overflow and spill to waste on the ground by the time she got to them tomorrow morning. It was futile to try to explain this to Ma Whindiah whose lips were turned down in a mowe of disapproval. "I'll come back and carry it."

If she didn't stop to check the catfish traps, she would give herself time. But that meant she wouldn't see Azi or Nteh today. She had half expected them to call out to her earlier that morning as she walked past the swamp on her way to the nguo, but the chunh had remained silent and forbiddingly

mysterious. She left the market still undecided about stopping at the swamp. Her feet made the decision for her when, lost in thought, she took a shortcut which wound through the tomato farms near the market directly to another of her catfish traps. This one was further away from the road than the one where she had met the mihng-nueh. It had two big fish in it which was the usual number she caught from this particular spot. She took them out of the basket and strung them for transport. Deciding to forgo checking the other traps, she started toward home, walking along the edge of the swamp. A rippling sound in the water made her turn around.

Azi glided toward her. "You didn't check your other traps," she said, her voice calm even though she had been moving through the water at a faster than normal speed. "We caught some fish for you."

Kenoweh couldn't stop her smile and Azi beamed back at her. "Weh, thank you! But I have to hurry and go home. My stepmother has left some work for me to do."

Azi's smile faded and her lips curled into a snarl when she mentioned Ma Whindiah.

"Is she always giving you extra work?" she asked.

"I do all the work in the house already," Kenoweh replied with a shrug before turning around to resume her walk. Azi followed along in the water.

"Our stepmother used to give us a lot of work. We could never do it all," Azi said. "Then she beat us and refused to give us food."

"I always try to do everything Ma Whindiah wants me to do. I don't like it when she starts shouting and my father always supports her."

"Our father always supported our stepmother too. Even when she beat Nteh and locked him outside one night because he stole food when he was hungry."

Kenoweh frowned, thinking of the playful little boy and how afraid he must have been. “Is that why you left and came here to stay with Songkanngoh?” She asked.

“We didn’t want to... I mean we didn’t leave our house to come here,” Azi replied, the words spilling from her lips like they tasted bitter. “We were trying to go to our mother’s people in Ndza’la. But I didn’t remember the road well, so we got lost. Then Nteh fell into the chunh, and then I fell in too when I tried to help him. That is how we started staying with Songkanngoh.”

Kenoweh’s breath caught on her next inhale. Songkanngoh *did* help children with wicked stepmothers. They just had to drown in the chunh first. “Do you like it here?” she asked.

“We take care of ourselves. Songkanngoh is just there to make sure that all of us behave.” Azi hadn’t answered her question, but Kenoweh didn’t press.

“How many of you are there?” she asked instead.

“There are many of us. I don’t know everyone, and some of the others don’t stay here all the time.”

“Where do they go?”

“When the water from Mendjing comes, they follow it back to other chunhs in Ambalang and Bongola.”

“So, there are mihng-nueh in other chunhs?”

Azi looked over at Kenoweh, amused. “There are mihng nueh everywhere. Don’t you know? We just don’t like to show ourselves to people because they get so afraid.”

Kenoweh chuckled, remembering how frightened she had been. “My mother used to tell us stories about mihng-nueh. She said you eat people.”

“Sometimes,” Azi agreed cheerfully. “But they are already dead when we eat them. They taste better than frogs and the other things we normally eat.”

Kenoweh stared at her, horrified. She sounded like she was talking about eating rice and catfish stew or hot makara balls and pepper sauce.

"We don't eat them often," Azi added quickly when she saw the horrified look on Kenoweh's face. "People don't drown in the swamp a lot these days."

"That's a good thing," Kenoweh said emphatically, and Azi laughed. "So, how does Songkanngoh decide who becomes mihng-nueh and who you eat?"

"Only children can become mihng-nueh," Azi replied. "Oh! I didn't know that!"

"You know, if you want to become one of us, you can."

"What do you mean?" Kenoweh frowned perplexedly, looking over at Azi.

"If you want to become a mihng-nueh," Azi repeated, "you can. I told Songkanngoh about you and how your stepmother was maltreating you. He said if you want to join us, you can." She sounded hopeful.

"But don't I have to die first?" Kenoweh asked the question before she could stop herself. A look of such profound sadness crossed Azi's face, Kenoweh wished she'd said nothing.

"You won't be able to live in the village with people, but you will live with us. And there is a way you can become mihng-nueh without needing to drown first."

Kenoweh silently contemplated the idea for a few seconds. Could she give up life in the village to become a mihng-nueh? She thought about Papa, Ma Whindiah, and all her relatives who, aside from Pa Mbizih, acted like she didn't exist.

"You'll have to walk into the chunh without fear in your heart," Azi continued, hope brightening her voice. "You must do it on the night of a new moon and there's a song you have to sing to call Songkanngoh." She started singing:

*I have come to see my friend  
Songkannghoh is my friend  
I come with no fear in my heart.  
Songkannghoh is my friend*

Kenoweh listened to the song silently, wondering if she could willingly walk into the chunh. What would life as a mihng-nueh be like? From what Azi described, she would be surrounded by other children, able to go where she liked when she liked, supernaturally strong and under the protection of the powerful nueh. But that would mean never seeing Pa Mbizih again or walking from tree to tree in the nguo she loved. It would mean never eating khoki corn, achu with njakatu and mushrooms, or akara beans. It would mean never drinking palm wine or corn beer again.

“I don’t know, Azi,” she said. “I’ll think about it. I have to hurry and go back to the compound now. But I’ll come back for the fish tomorrow.”

Disappointment flitted across Azi’s face. “Nteh will be here.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s with Songkannghoh.” Azi’s response was clipped. Something sharp and sour stabbed Kenoweh in the chest as she realized she’d hurt her friend’s feelings.

“Greet him for me.”

“He will hear!” Azi glided away.

“Bye, Azi!” Kenoweh called after her, hoping for something: a glance, a smile, even one of Azi’s sinister looks. The mihng nueh sank into the swamp without responding or looking back.

Her heart aching, Kenoweh thought about Azi’s offer for the rest of her walk home. It would be so simple to walk away from everything in her life. But did she really want to become a mihng-nueh? She liked being human. She liked the way the sun changed the color of the sky as it rose from

behind the hills. She liked the feeling of steadily increasing heat as it climbed the sky. Would she still be able to see and feel things the same way if she was a mihng-nueh? Would she still be able to smell the rain before it fell? Was the chunh always warm? She hated feeling cold. She needed to ask Azi these questions before she could decide. And then there were other things she wanted to ask which she didn't think she could bring herself to. Things like if Azi missed being human. Kenoweh remembered the sad look on Azi's face when she asked if dying was necessary to become a mihng-nueh. What did she really think about her new life? How long had they been mihng-nueh, anyway? She was hungry, thirsty, and tired when she got home but the sea of corn cobs spread out on mukuta bags in the yard meant Ma Whindiah didn't plan for her to get any rest that day. She stared at the cobs in dismay. Did the woman really expect her to scratch all that and bring it to the market today? *Our stepmother used to give us so much work, we could never do it all. Then she beat us and refused to give us food.* Azi's words from earlier returned to her and Kenoweh immediately understood Ma Whindiah's plan. This was a setup so the woman could get more revenge. She was still angry about the money. Anger pooled in Kenoweh's chest, stealing away her breath. A loud snore came from inside the house. Papa was home but there would be no help from his direction either. Not with the corn and certainly not with reasoning with Ma Whindiah. Kenoweh sighed resignedly and walked into the house to put away her tapping equipment and the fish.

She had work to do.

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Two weeks later, Kenoweh was overwhelmed. Ma Whindiah was relentless in her quest for revenge. She added more things for Kenoweh to do, with the expectation that she would fail. Fortunately, Kenoweh had help. She no longer needed to set and check multiple fish traps. Azi and Nteh recruited other mihng-nueh to the cause. Sometimes, it was a different child waiting at Kenoweh's trap with a basket full of fish. Then Ma Whindiah doubled her palm wine requirement, knowing how much work Kenoweh would need to put in to give her four jugs of palm wine a day. It also made it impossible for her to save any for sale. Azi, who by then had decided the woman was her mortal enemy, asked Kenoweh to show her how to tap palm wine. Soon, in addition to the baskets of fish, the mihng-nuehs brought jugs of wine tapped from raphia palms in parts of the chunh no one could reach. Undeterred, Ma Whindiah added more tasks. There were always errands to run, corn to scratch and grind, beans and rice to pick, egusi to peel, and loads to carry to or from the market. Kenoweh did it all. She even made an agreement with Buziwe, the man who ground corn in the market, to give him a bottle of palm wine if he stayed open later than usual to grind corn for her. There was a cost to Kenoweh's diligence. She slept less and less, and her muscles ached incessantly from all the walking she now had to do, sometimes with Anombie tied to her back. Ma Whindiah had started giving Kenoweh the baby to take home with her, claiming that his creeping made it inconvenient to keep him with her at the market. The first time she asked Kenoweh to watch the baby, she had arrived at the market later than usual, slowed down by having to carry four jugs of wine. Anombie was crying loudly in his basket.

"Take him back to the house with you," Ma Whindiah instructed with an annoyed huff, conveniently ignoring everything else she had asked Kenoweh to do. "Feed him some pap. Put the ground nuts in it. He likes that."

Kenoweh wasn't fooled. Ma Whindiah was petty and persistent. She never let go of real or perceived slights. She took the crying baby from the basket and secured him to her back with the cloth Ma Whindiah distractedly handed her. It would be a slow walk home carrying the baby and the fish, but she had no choice in the matter. Azi and Nteh were waiting for her with the customary trap of fish when she arrived.

"Azi look!" Nteh squealed in delight when he saw Anombie. The baby chortled back, completely oblivious to what Nteh was. "He resembles Supewoh!"

"She has started giving you her baby to watch over too now, eh?" Azi asked, looking at the baby dispassionately from where she and Nteh floated in the chunh.

"I don't mind," Kenoweh replied defensively. "He's my little brother."

Azi snorted. "Just make sure a hair doesn't drop from his head, or you'll realize that he is her child before he is your brother."

"Who is Supewoh?" Kenoweh asked, desperate to shift Azi's attention from the baby. The mihng-nueh looked like she would drown and eat Anombie if she could.

"He is our little brother," Nteh supplied helpfully. "He must be an old man now."

Kenoweh's eyes widened. She had asked and gotten answers for most of her questions about what life as a mihng-nueh was like, but she still hadn't been able to bring herself to ask them how long they had been in the chunh. She suspected Azi and Nteh were much older than they looked. Sometimes, when Azi spoke, there was a note of adult resentment in her voice. To hear it confirmed now that they were indeed older than they seemed sharpened the ache of angry sympathy Kenoweh felt whenever she was with them. Which dreams had been crushed first by their stepmother who sounded worse than Ma Whindiah, and then

by their premature deaths? Had becoming mihng-nueh given them any relief? She knew they could still hear, taste, smell, and see like normal people even though they no longer felt heat or cold. She knew they'd simply stopped wanting normal human food when they became mihng-nueh. Azi assured her that she would develop a taste for the frogs, salamanders, fish, and other creatures they ate, once she got over the idea of eating them raw. She also knew they would only ever be able to live in this or other chunhs in the area. Life on land was impossible and Songkanngoh disapproved of contact with family, friends, or other humans. When she'd asked why the nueh was making an exception for her, Azi's reply unfurled a bloom of dread in Kenoweh's belly.

"Because you have a wicked stepmother."

Life as a mihng-nueh did seem like a child's dream. They lived in the chunh and learned what they needed to learn about being mihng-nueh from Songkanngoh. Once sufficiently instructed in what was safe to eat, where was safe to go, and how to hide from nosy humans, the nueh gave them free rein of the chunh, interfering with their lives only to answer questions or resolve squabbles. Mihng-nueh, like their guardian spirit, lived forever, eternally frozen in the physical form of the age at which they transformed.

"Our stepmother used to leave Supewoh with us," Azi's words interrupted her thoughts.

"I see," Kenoweh nodded, understanding Azi's earlier reaction.

"Sometimes," Azi continued, "when she went to the market, she left him in the house with us. One day, he touched a hot pot and burned his hand." She paused her story and her normally expressionless face twisted as she remembered what resulted from the child's unfortunate curiosity. Suddenly, she moved forward until the chunh's water reached only her ankle. She lifted her ragged, sodden dress and wiped away the mud on her right thigh to reveal twisted, scarred skin. Kenoweh

stared first in confusion and then in horrified comprehension, at what, clearly, was a scar from a hot water burn.

"She poured hot water on you," she whispered.

"And then she beat her and made her sleep outside!" Nteh added, his childish voice shaking with outrage.

"Weh, Azi..." Kenoweh's heart thudded painfully in her chest.

"That is the night I realized that she wanted to kill us. So, we decided we had to run away."

Kenoweh couldn't disagree with her assessment of the woman's intentions. What else could explain such cruelty? But then they drowned in the chunh while running away.

"Anyway, this is your fish," Azi darted back into the water and returned with the basket.

"Thank you, Azi," Kenoweh replied, her voice sorrowful and low.

"And be careful with that woman's child. That is a trap she has set for you."

Kenoweh nodded solemnly.

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The memory of Azi's scar and her dark warning echoed in Kenoweh's mind as she went about her duties for the next couple of days. She considered asking Papa to tell Ma Whindiah she couldn't watch the baby in addition to everything else but decided not to. Ma Whindiah ran the household and treated Papa like a petulant child. Perhaps it was his own shame or maybe he just didn't care anymore, but these days, Papa acted like Kenoweh didn't exist. When they spoke to each other, Papa's gaze rested on a spot just beyond her shoulder. When they worked together on the farm, Papa put as much distance as he could between himself and Kenoweh. Kenoweh took it

all in stride, her mind focused on surviving each moment and gathering up as much money as she could. With the mihng-nueh and Pa Mbizih's help she was quickly regaining the money she'd lost. It wouldn't be too long now until she could get away from Ma Whindiah's tyranny. Meanwhile, she would tap wine, trap fish, scratch corn, pick beans, watch the baby, and do anything else the woman wanted. She'd even started to enjoy the time she spent with Anombie, and they developed a routine. After taking the child from Ma Whindiah and going to the swamp to meet with Azi, Nteh, or whichever mihng-nueh would bring her fish, Kenoweh returned home with Anombie and cooked pap to feed the baby. Anombie almost always fell asleep after devouring the gruel of corn, ground nuts, and honey. This gave her time to prepare the fish for smoking and then focus her attention on whatever work Ma Whindiah had left for her. When the baby was awake, Kenoweh watched him like a hawk. If she needed to go to the farm, she took the baby with her and set him up on a mat in a safe and visible corner with bananas or whatever fruit she could find for him to eat or play with.

There were days when becoming a mihng-nueh and joining Azi, Nteh, and the others in the chunh was all she could think about. She longed to be around other children, to laugh and play and not have to worry about endless responsibilities. But did she want to be thirteen years old forever? She couldn't really think of her future beyond the point where she got out from under Ma Whindiah's wickedness. All her dreams from when she'd been a happy little girl who had a mother, father, siblings, and a home which overflowed with love had faded away, their memories translucent and thin like sun-dried leaves. These days, she wanted peace, and for her rage and grief to give way to something lighter. But more than anything else, she wanted to rest. Exhaustion was a threatening shadow, following her everywhere. Some days, she counted her steps

aloud as she walked, fearing that if she had no way to keep her mind engaged, she would fall asleep standing. Ma Whindiah continued to pile on work, taking it for granted that Kenoweh kept up with her demands. It was bean season so she bought bags of unshelled pods, confident in Kenoweh's availability and ability to shell and pick them clean of any twigs, stones, or other debris. Kenoweh hated picking beans. It was all she could do not to fall face first into the mound of bean pods in front of her. She returned home with Anombie one day to find even more bags of unshelled pods laid out for her attention. Fighting her exhaustion and tears of frustration, she prepared Anombie's food, fed him, and then played with him until he fell asleep. The rainy season had arrived with a parade of chilly days, so she made a soft bed of empty bags and blankets in the kitchen where it was warm and settled the baby down to sleep. Next, she gutted and cleaned the fish she'd brought from the chunh, smiling in pleased satisfaction at how big they continued to be. Pa Mbizih had asked for fish recently and she already knew which two she would give him. When the fish were clean and staked on bamboo spikes, she set up the fire for smoking, sorting through the woodpile nearby to find eucalyptus wood that wasn't too dry. She needed the fire to smoke rather than burn. She'd moved the piles of wood inside the kitchen earlier that week when it had started raining unexpectedly so the air in the warm kitchen would dry them out faster than the air outside would've. She found some suitable logs, placed them around the hot coals, and then surrounded them with drier pieces of wood. When eucalyptus-scented smoke billowed out and filled the kitchen, she placed a metal grate across the logs, carefully arranged the fish on it, and covered them with fresh, green plantain leaves that she weighed down with two heavy stones. That done, she dragged the first bag of bean pods to a spot just outside the

door and settled down to start working. Her fingers and toes quickly grew numb in the frigid air, but she knew she would fall asleep if she went back into the warm kitchen. A loud snore came from the living area of the house that adjoined the kitchen. Kenoweh sniffed in contempt. Of course, Papa was asleep. The chilly weather was a perfect excuse to drink more wine and stay in bed. She pushed the ungracious thoughts about Papa out of her mind and focused her attention on compelling her numb fingers to continue working. Why did it have to be so cold? *If you become a mihng-nueh, you will never feel cold again.* The thought popped into Kenoweh's mind unbidden and once again, she found herself lost in thoughts of what it would be like to join Azi and Nteh and live in the chunh. The three of them could even travel to other chunh in Ambalang or Bongola, maybe even cross over to the other side of the Mendjing Dam to see what life there is like. She smiled thinking about underwater adventures with tough, fierce Azi, and playful, happy Nteh. That would be a lot better than sitting in the cold, shelling beans, trying not to sleep even though she desperately needed to. Maybe she could rest for a few minutes. A little sleep would help her work faster. She leaned her head back and let the exhaustion take over.

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First, she smelled the smoke. Then the sound of a screaming baby seemed to come from far away. Kenoweh strained toward the sound, but it felt like she was trying to move against some large, invisible force that wanted her to remain immobile with her eyes closed. The screams grew louder. It sounded like Anombie. Kenoweh tried to move again but the force held her in place. Resigned, she drifted back to sleep. The

screams returned, this time accompanied by heavy footsteps and the sound of Papa shouting. Then, rough hands shook Kenoweh so violently she banged her head against the wall of the house and fell off the overturned clay pot on which she sat. Suddenly awake, she looked around in confusion. That is when she felt the waves of heat and saw the smoke billowing out from the kitchen's windows and doors. Shouting, she rose from the ground to run into the kitchen where she had left Anombie but collided with her father as he ran out of the burning kitchen carrying the shrieking baby.

"What have you done, Kenoweh?" he roared. "What have you done? Did you want to kill the child?"

Kenoweh followed him to where he knelt in the yard, cradling the screaming baby.

"Wooyoooo! Look at his legs! Aaaah! Mba Mbombi! His mother will finish us!"

Feeling sick to her stomach, Kenoweh looked at Anombie's legs. The baby's previously smooth, brown, chubby limbs were covered in burns, the skin peeled back in some places to reveal pink flesh.

"His mother will finish us! You tried to kill her child!"

"No, Papa!" Kenoweh pleaded tearfully. "I left him in the kitchen because it was warmer. I was outside, I fell asleep!"

"His mother will finish us! She will say I tried to give more of my children to nyongo!"

Kenoweh's world unraveled with the realization that if this specific accusation was what her father was worried about, Ma Whindiah or someone else must have already accused him of sacrificing his other children in a wealth-attracting ritual.

"You can't stay here," Papa looked up, his gaze meeting Kenoweh's. As she stared into his watery, bloodshot eyes, Kenoweh realized that this was the first time in three years that they'd really looked at each other. The person who looked

back at her was a faint echo of who she remembered Papa to be. “You have to leave the village. She’ll never forgive us for this, and she’ll make sure everybody hates you too.”

“Papa...” Kenoweh fell to her knees next to her father, unable to speak past her tears and the baby’s anguished screams.

“No! You must go! I can show you where she hides her money. Take whatever you want and go to Mendar or Bofou and stay there. Don’t come back to the village.”

“I fell asleep! I was so tired, I fell asleep!” Kenoweh cried.

“It doesn’t matter. You know she won’t care.” He was right. Ma Whindiah would never forgive them. Even if the woman took the child and returned to her parents’ home as she had the right to do, what had happened here today would follow Kenoweh and her father for the rest of their lives. It was one thing for a child to have an accident at home. That was a common enough occurrence. But given the misfortunes that had already befallen their family, people would talk, especially if there were already nyongo accusations.

“You have to go, Keno. I’m so sorry, my daughter.” Papa’s hoarse plea interrupted her frantic thoughts. She looked into his eyes again, searching for things she knew she wouldn’t find. Papa’s eyes were wild with fear and other big, unwieldy emotions whose names Kenoweh never wanted to know.

“Papa...” she started, but he cut her off with a rough push.

“You have to leave now before people start coming. I’m sure they hear the baby crying. She keeps her money in the bag she bought last year. Take it all and go!”

Still half convinced this was just an exhaustion-fueled nightmare, Kenoweh looked at Anombie’s tear-streaked face. The now whimpering baby looked at them with wide, fear-filled eyes.

“I’m sorry, Anombie! I fell asleep, I was so tired...” She knew the baby couldn’t understand, but she spoke anyway, hoping her apology registered somewhere in his mind.

"Any man dey house? Na weti di happen?"

Neither Kenoweh nor Papa could see the man speaking through the plantain trees and bushes that separated the house from the road, but they froze in place.

"Any man dey house?" The man repeated his question and then they heard his footsteps walking down the path toward the house.

"Go!" Papa hissed. Kenoweh took off running.

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She went to the chunh. It was the most logical place to go since no one would think to look for her there. Azi took one look at her tear-streaked, terror-filled face and knew what needed to be done.

"Follow me," she said, and carefully navigated Kenoweh deep into the chunh. They went through sections Kenoweh didn't even know existed. Eventually, they reached a small strip of land far away from the chunh's edges where people set catfish traps. Kenoweh stayed there for the next couple of days. Azi searched the chunh for anything that might be useful: fruit that fell into the swamp from trees on the small islands dotting the chunh, containers in which Kenoweh could collect rainwater to drink, discarded muddy clothes that she could dry and layer onto her own clothes for added warmth, bits of rope and raphia fronds so Kenoweh could build herself a small shelter from the rain.

"I wish I could leave the chunh so I can go bring you some fire," Azi grumbled on Kenoweh's fifth day in the chunh.

"You, Nteh and the others have already helped me so much, Azi," Kenoweh comforted her. "I would probably be dead if it wasn't for you."

"Well, you better not die," Azi said irritably, glaring at Kenoweh. "I'll eat you with anger in my heart if you do."

Kenoweh gawked at her, unsure whether to laugh or be afraid.

Azi continued glaring back at her and then her gaze softened. "I told you she was setting a trap for you, Kenoweh..." There was gentle reprimand in her voice.

"I know, Azi," Kenoweh replied miserably. "I didn't want her to win. I was trying so hard. But I fell asleep."

"She didn't win," Azi spat. "Her child is burned and now she's stuck with your father who is useless."

Kenoweh winced at the harsh way Azi spoke of Papa, but she didn't have the energy to defend the man. Not now. Not after everything. She wondered how Anombie was doing and then pushed the thought away before it took hold and spiraled into more unwelcome thoughts.

"Azi! Kenoweh!" Nteh glided over to where they were. "I saw two men. They were talking about Kenoweh."

"What did they say?" Kenoweh asked, eager to hear something, anything.

"They said that if you ran away like that, then you and your father surely had something to do with what happened to Anombie. That the kind of things that have happened to your family are not normal."

"Nteh!" Azi hissed, "shut up!"

"I already knew they were going to think that way, Azi," Kenoweh said, blinking away her gathering tears. A part of her had hoped that Papa would be wrong. That people would remember Ma Whindiah's cruelty and see the role she had played in her son's accident.

"But it's not true!" Azi cried.

"It doesn't matter anymore. Did they say anything about Anombie?" Kenoweh felt nauseous thinking about the baby. Nteh shook his head. "They talked about you and then they said it is good that your stepmother has taken the matter to the Fon's palace so Kwifon can investigate the matter."

For a few seconds, Kenoweh wished she'd run to Pa Mbizih, instead of the chunh. Perhaps the kindly, older man might've offered some comfort and protection while the Kwifon investigated. The Kwifon advised the Fon who ruled the people. They were thorough with their investigations and fair in their judgments. She would never know now. By running away she'd made herself look guilty, and unless she was willing to risk being caught if she went back to the village to take the money from where Papa had told her Ma Whindiah kept it, she was stuck here in the chunh. What little hope she had left slipped away like a thread of smoke carried away on a sharp gust of wind.

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Later that night, full of fruit and palm wine Azi had brought, Kenoweh sat near the edge of the swamp, staring up at the sky, rocking with the gentle waves of the sounds of crickets and frogs in the swamp. For the first time in her life, she understood why Papa drank so much.

"What are you going to do?" Azi asked softly.

She and Nteh floated in the water next to her.

"I don't know, Azi," Kenoweh whispered. Tears filled her eyes and she let them flow. Azi let her cry for a few minutes then came as close as she could get.

"I'm so sorry, Kenoweh," she murmured, reaching out to rub her arm. "I am so sorry for everything."

"It is not your fault. You tried to help me. You warned me about her."

"I know. I'm still sorry. Things like this should not happen to children."

Kenoweh started to remind her that she was a child too but then stopped herself, remembering Nteh's comment about their brother.

"How old are you, Azi?" she asked softly. The mihng-nueh didn't answer for a long time.

"When we ran away from home, they'd not started building Mendjing Dam."

Azi's response pulled all air from Kenoweh's lungs. Before he died, Papa's father told stories about how he went to work with the people building the dam.

"Do you like being a mihng-nueh?" Kenoweh pushed past her fear and asked the question. When her friend didn't answer immediately, Kenoweh looked over at her. Azi was looking up at the moonless sky.

"It is fine most of the time," she said. "I take care of Nteh as I always have. But sometimes, I wish I'd just died. It is hard seeing people, especially women and children. I wanted to have my own family one day."

Her heart aching for her friend, Kenoweh reached out and held Azi's hand. Together, they looked up at the sky. The stars glimmered silently, offering no comfort beyond their kindly diffused light. *There is no moon tonight.* The thought made Kenoweh shiver with fear and excitement. She could become a mihng-nueh tonight if she wanted to. Life in the village or anywhere else had little left to offer her, it seemed. But yet, it would be a big change. Could she really do it? A small smile curved her lips as she remembered her thoughts about the adventures they could have. Feeling suddenly decisive, she stood up from where she sat and stepped into the water.

"Kenoweh, what are you doing?" Azi asked from where she floated.

"I think I want to become a mihng-nueh."

Azi's eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

"I don't know," Kenoweh replied honestly. "But there is nothing left for me in this life. I can't stay here forever. If I

become a mihng-nueh, at least I'll have you and Nteh as my friends and I can go to other places freely."

"You won't be able to become a normal person again," Azi cautioned, sounding frightened.

"Aren't you the one who wanted me to become like you?" Kenoweh asked, smiling.

"Yes, but it's a big decision," Azi seemed genuinely concerned.

"I already made up my mind," Kenoweh stepped further into the water.

"Are you sure?" Azi asked again.

"I'm sure," Kenoweh assured her. Azi's smile started hesitantly, then spread into a blindingly happy grin. Nteh, who had been silent all along, whooped joyfully. He and Azi glided further out into the swamp and then turned to face Kenoweh.

"Come then," Azi called, holding out a hand. "We'll take you to Songkanngoh."

Kenoweh stepped further into the water and started singing.

*The End.*



# The Mapa'in Don't Give Bad Gifts

*General, West Africa*

FOR YEARS AND years, Apai tried unsuccessfully to have a baby. She prayed and gave offerings from the best parts of her harvest to the Mapa'in, the spirits of the rivers and seas who gave women children. She observed all prohibitions and, as the Mapa'in required of all women who made devotions to them, she helped the women of the village with their children, caring for them as if they were her own. Still, Apai didn't ever get pregnant. Full of faith and knowing she had done nothing to incur the disfavor of the Mapa'in, Apai continued to make her offerings and fulfill her duties.

One evening, as Apai walked home after leaving her offering to the Mapa'in on the beach, she heard a baby crying. She ran toward the cries which came from the salt marshes at the point where the river that flowed through their village met the sea.

Startled cormorants flew away as she waded into the marsh, her eyes scanning the plant-covered, watery surface. A flash of ruddy, brown caught her eye and she moved toward it, her heart pounding in her chest. The baby girl lay naked on a bed of wet leaves, shivering in the chill evening air. *Who would leave a baby here, exposed to the elements and whatever creatures that lurk in the waters?* Apai thought to herself as she lifted the baby and looked her over. She couldn't be older than a couple of months and seemed well-fed and healthy. She cradled the infant and rocked her till she stopped crying. Suddenly Apai was filled with joy and a conviction that the Mapa'in had finally heard her prayers. She decided to take the baby home.

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"In all of our people's history, the Mapa'in have never given a woman a child in this way!" Soong, her husband, protested when he saw the baby. "Are you sure this child is from them?"

"All children come from the Mapa'in," Apai replied confidently. She smiled at the giggling bundle in her arms and tickled her lightly, laughing joyfully when the child's happy squeals filled the house.

"We don't even have a placenta to bury!" Soong continued. "We don't know where her roots are growing! People haven't spoken good things in her life. They will never accept her!"

"If she is not mine," Apai asked impatiently, "where is her mother? I'll take care of her until her real mother comes looking for her."

She named the child Shepi, which means "Gift," and raised her as her own. The people of the village were surprised to see Apai with a baby. But since she was known to be a good

woman and there had been no miscarriages or complaints of a missing baby, no one could accuse Apai of bad sorcery.

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Shepi grew up to be a kind and helpful girl like her mother. She learned all the ways of the people of the village and did what was expected of her. Nevertheless, every time other parents invited the children of her age cohort to their compounds to eat, sing, and dance after the work and lessons of the day were done, they wouldn't let Shepi come.

"We are sorry, Shepi," they would say, kindly but regretfully. "We don't know where your placenta is buried. Your roots don't touch ours. We don't know what has been spoken into your life. We can't let you come to our compound."

The first time this happened, Shepi was confused. She went home and asked Apai where her placenta was buried.

"It is buried in the salt marshes, where the river meets the sea," Apai told her, afraid of how the truth might make Shepi feel.

"Then why do people say they don't know me?" Shepi asked.

"They say that because they weren't there when we buried it. They didn't get a chance to speak the good things into your life, so they don't know who you are becoming. But you are a gift of the Mapa'in and the Mapa'in don't give bad gifts. Don't take their words to heart, daughter. Remain the gift that you are. Everything will be fine."

Soong never openly questioned Apai's explanations, but when they were alone he would reprimand her gently.

"You lie to the child so easily, Apai. What will you do if she finds out the truth?"

But Shepi trusted her mother so she believed what she said. Apai always told her stories about the Mapa'in in those days. Shepi loved to hear about the beautiful and brave women and men, who rode the maelstroms in the sea and watched over the people in their village and all the other villages along the seashore. Still, every time she got turned away from the homes of her friends, a seed of anger and sorrow was planted in her heart. She would walk to the salt marshes, where the river met the sea, and sing to the Mapa'in:

*Mapa'in, Givers of All Children  
Mother says you don't give bad gifts  
Why am I a pile of yams that no one wants to touch?  
Mapa'in, Givers of All Children  
Mother says you don't give bad gifts.  
Why am I fruit on a tree no one wants to climb?*

The Mapa'in never replied which made Shepi sadder and angrier.

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Time passed and soon the girls in Shepi's cohort were ready for their himsa, the ceremony that would mark their entry into adulthood. The night of the gathering, when the mo'himsa, the leader of the women's society, went from house to house to gather the girls who were ready for the ceremony, Shepi waited and waited, but the woman, the singing girls in tow, walked past their house. Apai and Soong, who waited with her, held her close as she cried. The girls' singing became fainter and fainter as the mo'himsa led them into the sacred forest for the rituals that mark the start of the ceremony.

Later that night, when they thought she was asleep, Shepi heard Apai and Soong talking.

"This is what I was afraid would happen," Soong said to Apai. "What are we going to do? Girls who don't participate in the himsa are aburuku. Outcasts!"

"I don't know, Soong!" Apai replied frantically. "I don't know!"

They didn't let Shepi leave the house while the girls were away, hoping that in her absence, people would assume that she had gone to the sacred forest with the other girls. But the whispers started as soon as the other girls came back and soon everyone in the village knew Shepi hadn't participated in the himsa with her cohort. The friends she used to play with began to avoid her, so Shepi busied herself with work. Her family grew the best vegetables in the village. People always flocked to their market stall, eager to buy the plump tomatoes, bright yellow peppers, and other vegetables they sold. She also started taking care of the younger children in the village as her mother had done before she was born. She liked being with the children because they were always sweet and kind. They never made her feel like she didn't belong. When there was a wedding or any other celebration, after her parents left to join the other villagers, she would go to the salt marshes and sing her sad song to the Mapa'in. Every time she came home, her eyes swollen with tears, Apai hugged her and told her everything would be fine. Shepi always agreed but she didn't always believe her mother.

When the girls in her cohort started marrying, Shepi tried to be happy for them. She helped Apai prepare food for the wedding feasts even though she knew that she wouldn't be invited to the ceremonies. Each time Apai and Soong left for the feasts, Shepi went to the estuary and sang to the Mapa'in. But they never responded.

When the last girl in her age cohort married, making Shepi the only unmarried girl of age in the village, she was heartbroken

and angry. She went to the estuary as usual and sang her song, this time throwing stones into the water as she sang:

*Mapa'in, Givers of All Children*  
*Mother says you don't give bad gifts*  
*Why am I a pile of yams that no one wants to touch?*  
*Mapa'in, Givers of All Children*  
*Mother says you don't give bad gifts.*  
*Why am I fruit on a tree no one wants to climb?*

She sang the song three times and tossed a stone into the water every time she asked the question. When she tossed in the sixth stone, a churning started in the water at the point where the stone had sunk. The churning intensified, growing bigger and bigger until it formed an opening in the water. Shepi was frightened but she remembered that in the stories Apai told her, maelstroms were portals through which the Mapa'in traveled when they wanted to be among people. She watched the maelstrom grow bigger and bigger and then gasped when a woman walked out of the opening. Her long, dark green skirts were made from seaweed and a neckpiece made from colorful seashells and pearls hung from her neck, draping over her breasts. Her smooth, brown skin gleamed in the afternoon sunlight and her thick hair was braided into an elaborate pattern with cowrie shells threaded through it. When the woman got close enough for Shepi to see her face, her heart almost fell into her stomach. It was like looking into the copper mirror Apai used to apply white clay to her face before dance ceremonies. The woman didn't say anything. She looked at Shepi with love and sadness in her eyes and then held out her hand. Suddenly, Shepi knew that if she took the woman's hand, she would return down the maelstrom with her to her true people where she would be loved and accepted in ways that she had never been loved and

accepted among the people of the village. She was suddenly flooded with mental images of herself surrounded by people with strange but familiar faces.

She saw three younger girls who looked just like the woman standing before her. In the vision, they ran to Shepi, hugged her, and showered her with kisses. There was a man with them and when Shepi looked at him, he stepped forward and placed a neckpiece of seashells and pearls around her neck. *This is my father! These are my sisters!* Shepi thought, overjoyed, and relieved. Finally, she knew where she came from, who she belonged with. She took a step toward the woman who she now knew to be her real mother. But when Shepi's feet touched the water, she was flooded with new mental images: she saw herself through Apai's eyes the day Apai brought her home from the marshes.

Then she saw, through her own eyes, the joy on Apai's face as she looked down at the baby cradled in her arms. The images continued changing: Apai watching her take her first steps; the pride and love in Soong's eyes when she showed him the newly germinated tomatoes and peppers in the small garden he had helped her dig; the last time they all went to the farm to work together; how satisfied she'd felt as she dug the red earth and made beds to plant seeds; the many nights she and her parents sat around the fire in their house, talking and laughing with each other; the way Apai braided her hair with gentle, attentive care and when she was finished, held up the copper mirror so Shepi could admire herself; the way some villagers despite their rejection still treated her and her parents with respect and courtesy; the people at the market who always made a point to buy from their stall; the way some villagers defended her when others were unkind; the happy laughter of the children she cared for. The memories were so vivid, they stopped her in her tracks. She realized then that there were still many good things in her life despite the villagers' rejection. Her real mother smiled with

understanding and then held out her other hand. In it were the six stones Shepi had thrown into the water. When she spoke, her voice was the howling wind over the sea.

“You will be here for sixty more years and then you will come home to us whether you want to or not. During that time, you can learn to love your life as it is or let your sadness and anger rule it. If the loneliness ever gets unbearable throw one of these stones in the water and I’ll come for you. But the condition will always be the same. If you come with me, you will never be able to come back here. No one will know where you have gone or if they will ever see you again. They will think you are dead. Do you understand?”

Shepi silently took the stones. Her mother kissed her on the forehead and spoke again. “Apai may not have told you the full truth, but she was right about one thing. The Mapa’in don’t give bad gifts, my child. Be the gift that you are and know that we are always watching over you.”

Shepi watched her mother descend back into the maelstrom. She kept on watching until the waters stopped churning, and everything returned to normal. Finally, she knew who she was and where she came from. She knew she could be happy with her life as it was. She also realized the gift her mother had given her. She had time to prepare the people who loved her for her inevitable return home. She ran all the way back to the village and when she saw Apai, she hugged her close.

“You should’ve told me the whole truth, Mama,” she said gently. “My placenta is not buried in the salt marshes where the river meets the sea. My placenta is not buried at all. I am not from here.”

She told Apai about the woman who came from the water and showed her the stones. When Apai heard of the difficult choice Shepi had made out of love for her and the life they had given her, she was filled with love, pride, but also guilt.

"I am sorry I didn't tell you the whole truth, Shepi. I was afraid."

"I understand, Mama. I chose to stay with you, and I know I can go to my people any time I want. Everything will be fine."

And so Shepi remained in the village with Apai and Soong. She strung the six stones into a necklace which she wore at all times as a reminder that she belonged somewhere.

*The End.*



# The Coming of The Dawn Dance

*Mende, Sierra Leone*

1.

MY FAMILY LEFT Liberia in May of 2002. I remember the fear in my father's face after a short telephone conversation with his boss. I remember his clipped instructions to me and my brother, Sammy, to change from our pajamas into outside clothes and carry the suitcases we'd packed a few days earlier to the car. No one spoke as our neighbor, Mr. Gulama, drove us through the city's dark, quiet streets to Monrovia's Roberts International Airport. We were ushered toward the waiting plane almost as soon as we left the car. I remember mostly being upset that I wouldn't hear the rest of the story my newly minted best friend,

Clara, Mr. Gulama's daughter, had been telling me about her time in their country, Sierra Leone. I was completely enthralled by her account of her induction into Sande, the women's society of her people, the Mende. The account was completely unlike my thirteen-year-old experience of budding consciousness of womanhood, and even more fascinating because Clara wasn't supposed to tell me some of the things she shared. In retrospect, I think she needed to tell me the things she told me so she could process the experience herself. But in her sharing, she opened doors into my consciousness, and introduced me to figures who, since then, have become my companions in my dreams and in reality. My family is Cameroonian. I spent most of my childhood nestled in the suffocating yet comforting folds of heat in Douala, Cameroon's second largest city, located further down the West African coast from Monrovia. We were wealthy by all accounts. Both my parents were UK-trained accountants who easily grabbed prestigious positions when Maersk, the Danish shipping company, opened offices in Douala. When my father was transferred to Maersk's newly opened offices in Monrovia, my mother kept her position in Douala. They both agreed that it was best if their children spent some time outside Cameroon, so my brother Sammy and I spent many holidays at my father's house in Sinkor, a busy neighborhood in Monrovia.

Clara's family fled Sierra Leone during the country's civil war which paralleled Liberia's. They, and thousands of other Sierra Leonean refugees, settled in Monrovia, managing to carve out relatively stable lives despite the conflicts tearing both countries apart. Clara's parents also worked for Maersk, her father as an equipment operator and her mother as an office manager. Mr. Gulama's dark, square face, full lips, and starkly defined nose always made me think of the somber-faced traditional masks my father collected. He had a boisterous laugh that seemed wrong coming from a face so serious. Mrs. Gulama was svelte

and much quieter than her husband. For some reason, she reminded me of a snake: calm, keenly observant, and capable of striking with lethal force. Tall, dark, and quietly dignified, the Gulamas were a stunning couple, unlike my parents whose relatively short stature and light, brown skin seemed boring in comparison. Mr. Gulama was the public face of the family with the loyal support of his wife and daughter. Like her parents, Clara was tall and dark with a stunningly beautiful face. She was fifteen years old, only two years older than I was at the time. But she carried herself with a poise and assurance that imbued her with the same air of mystery as her mother. We met a day after I arrived in Monrovia for the first time with my father and Sammy. She came over to our house with a large dish of plantain yebeh, a welcome gift from her mother. We accepted the meal gratefully and she stayed to share some of it with us, smiling happily when we told her it tasted just like Cameroonian sese plantains. I warmed up to Clara almost immediately. I have no sisters and my relationship with my mother is close, but not so close I feel comfortable enough to share certain parts of myself with her. Clara is an only child. Perhaps that's why she welcomed my friendship with an eagerness and a generosity of spirit that was quite unlike the confusing maze of female friendship norms I had to navigate at school back in Cameroon.

As I spent more time around them, I noticed that the Gulamas had a connection with each other that seemed knit from an almost tangible awareness they had of each other as individuals. I could also sense, just beneath the surface, a ripple of something powerful :flowing from Mrs. Gulama to her husband and to Clara. Mr. Gulama treated his wife and daughter with a fervent respect bordering on reverence. Mrs. Gulama had an easy, sororal relationship with her daughter. It seemed, at the same time, strange yet appropriate for a mother and daughter. Both Gulama women treated Mr. Gulama

like a beloved and trusted older brother. The dynamic was completely foreign to me.

I'd spent the day of our sudden departure with Clara. She'd come over to our house with food from her mother. In my mother's absence, Mrs. Gulama supplied so many of our meals, my mother jokingly called the woman her "mbanya" – a Cameroonian term for co-wife – in a brittle tone which always made me roll my eyes. If she knew better, my mother would understand how pointless her jealousy was. My father was, indeed, half in love with Mrs. Gulama. I could tell by the way his eyes lit up excitedly then softened longingly when he saw her. But he was as loyal to my mother as Mrs. Gulama was to her husband. My mother had no reason to worry. I was especially happy that day because Mrs. Gulama included fish balls with the meal. Her fish balls were crispy, flavorful, and delicious. After gorging ourselves on them, Clara called me to sit between her legs on our veranda so she could braid my hair. This was something else she'd introduced me to: the simple delight of getting my hair braided by a friend, not a stranger in a hair salon. Back in Cameroon, girls like me who attended school in the English-speaking part of the country were required to cut our hair short. During the third term holidays when we were out of school for three months, most girls allowed themselves the luxury of braided hair. In Liberia, schools allow girls to grow their hair long. Clara and other girls I'd seen wore their hair in neat lines of cornrows.

"Your hair is so short!" Clara complained, combing my hair with quick, deft movements. "Why don't they let you grow your hair? A woman's hair is supposed to be long and thick, like Tingoi's."

"Who is Tingoi?" I asked, wincing as the comb pulled at my tight kinks.

“She is a beautiful water spirit,” Clara replied. “She has long hair and a ringed neck like yours.”

She tickled my neck playfully. I giggled and pulled away but she gathered me between her legs, placed my chin on her thigh, and carefully separated a strip of hair.

“Is she a mermaid?” I asked, my eyes watering. The other reason I kept my hair short was because even combing was agony.

“Yes, she’s a mermaid,” Clara confirmed. I yelped when she started to braid a cornrow, so she rubbed the spot to soothe it. “She has a woman’s body and a fish or snake’s tail.”

“We have something like that in Cameroon,” I said. “We call her Marni Wata.”

Clara murmured approvingly and I flushed with pleasure. I liked when Clara thought I knew things.

“But she’s bad,” I continued, eager to impress her with my knowledge. “People say she possesses girls and women and uses them to lead men astray.”

“That must be your Cameroonian mermaid then,” Clara chuckled. “To my people in Sierra Leone, Tingoi is the most beautiful woman in the world. All women want to be beautiful like her and strong like the Sowi.”

“Who is the Sowi?” I asked, wincing again as Clara pulled at my hair. She must have seen my face because, again, she rubbed the spot to soothe it. When she spoke, I could tell she was choosing her words carefully.

“She is an important woman in our community. She’s like the chief for women. Your people don’t have them?”

“We have chiefs but they are all men,” I told her, my brow creased in confusion. I was fully captivated by the idea of a chief only for women, this strong woman who, along with a beautiful mermaid, stood as symbols of beauty and power that girls and women aspired to. Maybe this was why Clara and her mother seemed so different? There was something of their

essence that spoke of access to a dimension of womanhood I felt locked out of. I didn't see it in my own mother who was beautiful, smart, ambitious, and yet never seemed quite sure if she knew what she was doing with me or herself.

"Your mother is a chief." I intended to ask a question but Clara pulled at my hair a bit roughly as I spoke so my words sounded more like a statement. Clara's hands paused and she looked down at me in surprise.

"How did you know?" she asked. I wanted to tell her I didn't until she confirmed but I decided against it.

"She seems very strong," I said instead.

"She is very strong," Clara confirmed, her voice husky and admiring. "She is the strongest woman I know."

"How did she become a chief?" I asked.

Clara hesitated again but she answered my question. "The other female chiefs made her a chief."

"There is more than one female chief?"

"There are many women chiefs among my people. Both of villages and of women."

I lifted my head from her thigh to look at her in confusion.  
"How come?"

Clara didn't immediately reply. She held my gaze for what felt like an eternity and then seemed to decide because she gently guided my head back to her thigh and spoke in a low voice as she continued braiding. "My people have an organization called Sande. It is an organization for women and you can only become a true Mende woman when you graduate from Sande."

"Is it a school?" I asked.

"It is like a school," Clara agreed.

"My mother is an EXSSAN," I said proudly. "The school I go to, Saker Baptist College, it has an alumni association called EXSSA. All girls who graduate can join."

“Yes, it’s like that.” Clara smiled down at me indulgently. “But Sande is for Mende women, it is not associated with any school or church.”

“So what do you learn at this school?” I pressed.

“We learn how to be women,” Clara said.

I pulled away from her again and looked up, my jaw slack with shock. “Really?”

“Yes,” she nodded confidently. “That’s why Mende people are special. We know who we are because we take the time to teach our boys and girls how to be real Mende men and women.”

Her confidently spoken words caused a tremor to course through my body.

“Are you in Sande school?” I asked her.

“I’ve graduated,” she said, but a small frown creased her brow. I wanted to wipe it away but my questions were more pressing.

“Is that why your parents treat you so differently?”

She smiled and nodded. I preened inwardly with the knowledge that I’d made her smile.

I returned my head to her thigh and pondered her words for a long time. “Clara, can you teach me how to be like you and your mum?”

## 2.

I know the woman is Mansarico from the moment she sits next to me. We are sitting on a stone in a grassy plain, surrounded by trees. Birds call overhead and the wind stirring the trees is heavy with moisture which smells of salt, so I know the ocean is nearby. I also know I am dreaming. I'd fallen asleep almost as soon as the plane took off from Monrovia, lulled by the steady buzz of the plane's engine. My dreams are vivid alternate realities I step into almost as soon as I close my eyes to sleep. I don't remember most of them but I knew I would remember this one. When I first found myself in the plain, I'd felt a strong urge to run around the trees that circled it, shouting as I did. I'd have done it too, but the urge to sit on the huge, black stone in the center of the clearing and wait had been stronger, so I sat and waited. I didn't see or hear her approach. I only felt her presence as she sat down next to me.

"I'm glad you came," she says, sounding like she's been expecting me. I hear her voice in my mind, not from where she sits. I try to turn and look at her but my body won't move. When I try to speak, my lips seem sealed shut.

"You don't need to see," she says gently. "And you know how to talk to me."

*I do?* I think to myself, confused.

"Yes, you do," she replies, a smile in her voice.

*But I am just thinking.*

"Yes, you are," Mansarico agrees. "And I can hear you. Just as you can hear me even though I am not speaking."

Neither of us speaks for a few moments.

“You’re Mansarico,” I say in my mind, finally. “Clara told me about you.”

“I know. That is why I am here. You have questions for me.”

I am so shocked by her words I can’t think of a thing to say in response to the queen and warrior who, according to Clara, appeared in a dream to Sande Jo, the woman who started Sande, and gave her instructions for its creation.

“You want to know why I started Sande.”

I do. That had been the main question in my mind as I listened to Clara tell me what she knew about the organization and its functions, officials, and practices after swearing me to secrecy with a solemn expression on her face.

“You’re not supposed to know some of the things I’ll tell you,” Clara told me. “So you must promise me that you won’t talk about this with anyone else or they will know it was me and I’ll get into a lot of trouble.”

As Clara spoke, I suddenly remembered a story in a book I had read in my school library. It was about a Christian missionary who’d saved a Kenyan chief from a brutal ambush. The men had sworn an oath to each other after the fight, sealing it with blood from cuts in their arms.

“Wait here,” I said to her and stood up from between her legs to run into our house. My father kept a packet of paper wrapped blades in his bathroom. He used them to trim his toenails. I took a fresh one from the pack and returned to Clara before carefully unwrapping the blade.

“I promise not to tell anyone,” I said, cutting a line in my right palm. Blood swelled out. I held both my palm and the blade out to Clara who seemed surprised. She gave me an approving look before taking the blade and cutting into her own palm. We shook hands, staring solemnly into each other’s eyes, and then at the mixture of our blood smeared onto our

palms. "You're my blood sister now," Clara said with a sudden, happy smile. I beamed back at her.

"That was a very serious thing to do." Mansarico's calmly spoken words interrupt my reverie.

"I wanted her to know I was serious," I say.

"That's good," Mansarico agrees firmly. "These are serious matters."

"So why did you start Sande?"

"I didn't start it. I just taught Sande Jo some new things so she could help the women in the community. Sande, or different forms of it, already existed among the people."

"Why does it exist?"

"So that the people can know who they are and how to be part of their community. Things weren't different back then from how they are today," Mansarico continues. "People want to be happy. They want to live good lives with their families and in their communities. We had to make sure people knew how to live with each other and behave because there are those who only think about themselves. People who will seek power so they can do wicked things. Organizations like Sande and others set standards for behavior, appoint people to teach the young, and solve problems that come up in the community. When I came to Sande Jo in that dream, it was at a time when the women needed a way to take care of themselves and each other. I showed her how they could do that more effectively."

"We have schools, churches, and the government for that now," I say. "But they don't always work," I add, thinking about why I am on a plane headed for Douala when I should be sleeping in my bed in Sinkor.

"No," the older woman agrees with a heavy sigh. "They don't always work. That too was as true back then as it is now."

"How is Sande different from schools and churches and governments?"

“Sande is like a school, a church, and a government, but it is one thing and belongs to the people, to the women. It is not something that came from outside.”

“We don’t have Sande where I come from,” I murmur.

“You do,” Mansarico says. “You just don’t know about it. All people everywhere have ways in which they prepare their children to become adults and make sure the community is united and prosperous. A lot has changed but if you ask your parents, they’ll tell you what they know. Ask your mother.”

“I don’t think my mother knows about these things,” I mutter dejectedly.

“Have you ever asked her?” Mansarico asks. I shake my head no. “Then you don’t know what she knows,” Mansarico says firmly. “Ask her.”

“I will.”

“Don’t tell her what you did with your friend. Wait and hear her response first.”

“I will,” I say again. We sit quietly for a few minutes. “Can I ask a question?”

Mansarico chuckles at my inquiry. “Do you want an answer?”

“I do,” I respond, smiling.

“Then ask,” she encourages. “If I have an answer, I’ll give it to you.”

“Alright,” I say, taking a deep breath. “Why are there all these problems if organizations like Sande is still there to show people how to be united?”

“I wish I had a simple answer to your question,” Mansarico says, taking a deep breath of her own. “All I can tell you is that people do their best and sometimes, it’s not enough. Sometimes, the greedy and power-hungry people win. This is why we must never stop trying to find out what the right thing to do is and do it when the opportunity comes. Circumstances never get bad all at once. It starts with one person or one

group of people making the wrong choice when faced with a decision. After that initial wrong choice, things could get better or they could get worse. It all depends on if those involved are willing to make different choices.”

I nod quietly. In my minds eye, I can see glittering spirals of decisions shooting in different directions from one brightly shining point, each spiral generating spirals of its own until my vision is clouded with the shimmering mass of them.

“Even when there are strong institutions like Sande,” Mansarico continues, “they are only as effective as the peoples’ willingness to fully participate in them and play by the rules. If people are not willing to hold themselves accountable, the institutions fail and everyone suffers. That is why Sande has some of the requirements it has.”

I wince and squeeze my thighs together as I think about one of the requirements.

“Even that one has its place,” Mansarico says gently. “Sometimes, a person’s willingness to endure pain or some other discomfort for a reward signifies their commitment to a cause. But it should be a choice that is freely made. If I was in charge now, I would remove that requirement completely or make it something the girls choose when they are able to make such choices reasonably and freely.”

I say nothing. I am not sure that any such choice can be made freely. If Mansarico hears my skeptical thoughts, she says nothing either.

“That being said,” she continues. “There are other requirements for Sande initiates that matter more than getting cut. Things like good character. I wish more emphasis was placed on that. It matters more than whether a girl is cut. Your friend’s mother is an example of a woman who has taken Sande’s philosophy to heart. She is, as the people say, a ngi beengo, a real mendemendemo.”

"What does that mean?" I ask, still squeezing my thighs together as I think about the cut Mansarico is referring to.

"It means she knows what she is doing. That she is a real Mende woman. She makes us proud. And your friend is a Poma Jowei. She is following in her mother's footsteps. One day, she too will be a great Sowei like her mother."

"She will be," I agree, happy for Clara despite the longing that stirs my heart. I want to be a great woman too.

"You will be," Mansarico assures me, reading my mind.

"You now know how great women are made. And you hunger for this greatness. You won't fail yourself if you stay faithful to, and grateful for, the path."

"I don't know the path," I mutter, not quite believing her. "Clara was to tell me more but now I've left Liberia."

"She is not the one who'll teach you the things you need to know," Mansarico says.

"Who will?" I ask.

"You will see."

### 3.

Our flight makes a brief stop in Lome. I wake up as we land in the Togolese capital and think about my dream as I watch the city's bright lights flashing by. I feel as if I am in a daze, as if my body has returned to the waking world but my consciousness lingers in the dream world. It doesn't help that Mansarico's last words leave me with a sense of incompleteness. If Clara is not the one to teach me, then who would it be? I feel a headache bloom. I ask my father for some paracetamol, and after swallowing the tablets I sink further into my seat and continue mulling over the dream and the things Clara had told me. She'd been pretty thorough. She started with a history of the Sande society, telling me both the historical account with Mansarico and the mythical account with Sande Jo. She outlined the institution's hierarchy from the head Sowei and her different assistants—the masquerades like Sowo and Gonde-down to the girls in training. Clara's description of the requirements to join the organization had felt both familiar and terrifying. Familiar because the seclusion, the hierarchies of power, and the strict daily regimen of singing, dancing, and lessons were similar to the structure of the boarding school I attended. Terrifying because nothing had prepared me for the part about the cutting. The hypersensitive piece of flesh between my thighs is still unexplored territory for me but I know without any doubt that I would never allow anyone with a blade near it.

"Must you do it?" I'd asked, shuddering at the thought of a blade and my clitoris.

"You can't be a real Sande girl if you don't get the cut," Clara responded with a nonchalant shrug. Her attitude was easygoing but her frown and clenched jaw suggested otherwise.

“But doesn’t it hurt?” I protested.

“This hurt too, didn’t it?” she asked, lifting my hand to expose my palm and the red line of the cut I’d made. She’d run into their yard after our bloody handshake and returned with leaves that she’d chewed into a paste and applied to our cuts. The bleeding had stopped almost immediately, the skin around the cut becoming tight and dry. “This hurt too and yet you did it because you wanted to be part of something.”

*It’s not the same thing!* I thought furiously, but I said nothing because I didn’t want her to stop talking to me. I think of what Mansarico said. *If I was in charge now, I would remove that requirement completely or make it something the girls choose when they are able to make such choices reasonably and freely.* I didn’t think freedom of choice could ever really be possible in this situation.

Clara told me about the different girls in her cohort and how their teachers had identified where the girls naturally excelled and nurtured each talent. She had an excellent memory and so she’d been taught, and continued to learn from her mother, about different medicinal herbs. That was how she’d known which plant to use to stop our cuts from bleeding.

“I want to be a midwife,” she declared, pausing her braiding to rub her itching eye. “That way I can help women in rural areas.”

“That’s really nice, Clara,” I said. I wanted to be an accountant. But I wasn’t sure if that was what I wanted or if I was simply planning to do what my parents did because it felt familiar.

“It’s not nice, it’s necessary. Those women need midwives who know what they are doing,” Clara said darkly. “So many of them have complications during birth.”

I was curious about the edge in Clara’s voice but I said nothing. We finished the braiding in silence.

“I’ll tell you more about the Sande tomorrow,” Clara promised, running a hand over my now finished cornrows

with a satisfied smile. “Your schools should really let girls braid their hair. You look beautiful like this.”

I hugged her. “Thank you for braiding my hair and for agreeing to teach me how to be a woman, Clara.”

She hugged me back with a happy laugh. “You are now a mbogboni, a trainee. But you’ll be a nyaha soon, a Sande girl like me! But remember,” she said, lifting a finger to her lips, “tell no one!”

When our flight takes off from Lome for Douala, I am burning with fever.

“It’s a short flight,” my father comforts me. “We’ll be home soon.”

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I don’t dream about Mansarico or anything related to Sande after we reach Douala even though I spend hours thinking about everything Clara told me. I also watch the news with mounting dread as the situation in Liberia escalates. My father talks with his boss regularly and hears from him that the Gulamas left for Ivory Coast a couple of days after we left. I am so relieved to hear Clara is safe I burst into tears.

“I didn’t realize you were so close to her,” my mother says, rubbing my back as I cry. She’s been watchful and solicitous since we returned from Monrovia and went from the airport to Laquintinie hospital where I was admitted because my fever was too high. I’d been discharged just a few days before. “You were over there for just a few months.”

“She is like my big sister,” I say through my tears. “She’s the one who braided my hair.”

“I see,” my mother replies. I resist the urge to push her away when I hear the brittleness in her voice. “Mama?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Do women from our village have an association that is just for them?”

“Yes, they do,” she replies, puzzled, tilting her head to the side. “It’s called Fembien. Why do you ask?”

“Do they have a school I can attend?”

Her eyebrows lift in surprise. “To learn what?” she asks.

“To learn how to be a woman.”

I can almost hear the sound of the frown which crashes her eyebrows down.

“There’s no school you can go to and learn how to be a woman. Where did you get that kind of idea?”

I start to answer then I remember Clara’s warning and close my mouth. “I read about it in a book,” I lie.

“Which book?” she presses, her eyes narrow and suspicious.

“I don’t remember, Mama,” I mutter.

“When you remember,” she says, giving me a long look, “come and tell me. I want to read it too.”

I nod and wince when I feel a twinge of pain in my head.

That night, I dream of Sowo.

## 4.

It is dawn and I'm standing on the banks of a river. It is quiet except for the sound of crickets, birds, the odd frog, and ripples of water lapping at the banks. I'm barefoot and my feet are wet from the dew-soaked grass. Once again, the air feels heavy with moisture and salt so I know I am near the ocean. It is a misty morning and as the sun inches its yellow-white glow into the sky, the mist takes on an ethereal quality. I feel like I am in one of those paintings of heaven I see in books. A plopping sound in the water draws my attention. When I look, I see something moving toward me in the water. I watch it approach, leaving a v-shaped trail of ripples in its wake. I take a few steps back as it comes closer, but I don't leave the bank. The ripples draw closer and closer, and then a figure emerges from the water. It is a masquerade of some kind. I know this because, like other masquerades I've seen, it has a head and face made from intricately carved wood, and a body made from strands of raffia and cloth. It is quite unlike any masquerade I've ever seen. First, it is female. I search my memory for any recollection of a female masquerade from the times I visited Oku, our village, but find none. Its mask and body are pitch black. A white scarf tied around the crest of the mask is the only splash of color. The mask itself is different from any kind of mask I have ever seen. A small and exquisitely carved bird sits on its crest. The bird leans forward with its head tilted as if it is asking a question. The mask's hair is represented in a series of precisely made cuts which resemble a braided hairstyle. It leads down to a broad forehead, lowered eyes, a small nose, and a closed mouth. The whole face is elegantly symmetrical but

seems small and compressed into the space it occupies, which doesn't make much sense given how much space the mask's full, striated neck takes up. Seated atop the body of black raffia and cloth strands, the figure is both mysterious and elegant. I release my breath in a rush of air when I realize the figure is not wet despite just having risen from the depths of the river. I watch in stunned silence as it walks past me without a word or gesture and heads toward the forest behind me. I stay on the bank staring at the river in confoundment, listening to the sound of the figure walking away, rustling the grass with its steps.

"Come with me," a voice says in my head, and I jump in surprise. It is Mrs. Gulama! I turn and hurry after her. We don't walk far before entering a circular clearing much like the one Mansarico and I had been in. Mrs. Gulama starts to dance almost as soon as we enter the clearing. Her movements are quick but surefooted. As she moves, I start to hear the beat she is dancing to: the insistent pounding of the drums, the swish of her garments, the tinkle of bells which I realize are attached to her back. I watch her dance around the clearing but I don't join in. She goes around the circle twice, passing me each time. On her third pass, I hear her voice again in my mind. "Dance with me."

"Me?" I ask, confused. She dances past, not responding, so I stay on the sidelines watching her. But then a wave of unease courses through my body and suddenly, I feel restless standing still. It is as if dancing is the reason this place exists and so, if I am not dancing, I have no reason to be here. Awkwardly, I step further into the clearing and start dancing, imitating Mrs. Gulama's steps the best I can.

"When we dance together," she starts to speak again in my mind, "we are doing more than moving our bodies. We are learning how to be coordinated and in rhythm with the other dancers around us. This is what Sande is about: how to be with

other women in peace and harmony. If we are not in rhythm with each other, we step on each other's toes, we get in each other's way, and the community suffers. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma," I say breathlessly, putting more effort into my dancing.

"Good. Dancing also helps us build what Mende people call Kahu and Kpaya. Strength of body and strength of mind. When your body and mind are strong and healthy, you can do the things you need to do and handle what life brings your way. A strong mind is important if you want to lead others or influence them. If you are a head dancer, the whole group follows your lead so you must be confident in yourself."

"Clara thinks you're the strongest person she knows," I blurt out.

"Clara loves her mother very much but she should listen to her more closely."

I falter in my dancing when the masquerade speaks. "You're not Mrs. Gulama?" I ask.

"I am not," the masquerade says. She keeps dancing so I fall back in step with her. "Sowo doesn't speak except through her representatives. Lydia Gulama is my representative so I am speaking with her voice."

"Oh..." I am not sure what to say. "Does she know—"

"She knows what you and Clara did," Sowo responds.

"Oh..." I say again.

"Pona is the next thing you must practice as a Sande girl," Sowo continues. "You must be straightforward, reliable, trustworthy. Clara wasn't practicing Pona when she told you some of the things she told you."

"She was just trying to help me because I asked her to!" I defend my friend.

"Yes," Sowo says. "It is a good thing to want to help people you care about. But Clara doesn't know you well. She didn't

know for sure if you would talk about the things she told you. She didn't tell you anything that couldn't be found out by asking the right person, but you must always consider the consequences of sharing your secrets with the wrong person. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma," I mutter again, still worried about Clara. "Your friend will be fine," Sowo assures me. "Her mother knows what she is doing."

"Thank you, Ma," I mumble.

"Sande girls must have Nemahulewe, which is intelligence." Sowo ignores my apology. "You must be able to use your mind and make good decisions. You must also practice Fulo-fulo which is quickness, and Di which is persistence. You must do things without delay and keep at them until you achieve your goal."

"Intelligence, diligence, persistence," I mutter to myself as I dance.

"Yes," Sowo says approvingly. "Add Ndilo, which is bravery, Tonya, which is truth, and Malondo, which is endurance. You must be brave and courageous, especially when declaring the truth, and when hardships come, as they always do, you must learn to endure."

"Bravery, truth, and endurance," I repeat. We dance around the clearing one more time and then suddenly, Sowo stops and starts to walk back toward the river. I follow her, out of breath but more energized than I've ever felt before.

"Most importantly, you must be generous with your goodness." Sowo keeps walking as she speaks. "That is Hindawanda. You must share the best parts of what you have, including yourself, with others. All that is possible for you to do for others, you must do. None of those other qualities matter if they don't come from a good and generous spirit. Do you understand?"

“Yes, Ma,” I say, almost running to keep up with her fast pace. When we reach the riverbank, Sowo pauses at the edge and I stand next to her, looking at the water.

“You asked your friend to teach you how to be a woman. There is no one way to be a woman but there are qualities that make a woman happier and more effective in her life. These are not much different from the qualities men need. Everyone benefits from striving for unity and harmony, for inner and outer strength. Everyone benefits when people are intelligent, diligent, persistent, brave, courageous, and truthful. Everyone benefits from endurance, and above all, from goodness of heart. The only thing we do differently in Sande is that we teach girls all of these things in an environment where they can learn to work with other girls and women as they grow older. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Ma,” I say again.

“There are other things that are important. How you present yourself to the world, for example. A good character matters but good grooming matters just as much. Everything in balance. If you cook good food but serve it in a cracked dish, it takes away from the food’s overall beauty and the enjoyment of it.”

“My mother only uses certain dishes when we have visitors. We use the cracked bowls and plates for other things around the house.”

“Yes,” Sowo says pensively. “The cracked bowls and plates still have their place in the home. They aren’t altogether useless. But I am not the one to talk to you about brokenness, or beauty for that matter.”

“Who will?” I ask.

“You’ll know when you meet them,” Sowo replies. “Now cross the river.”

“Cross the river?” I ask, confused.

“Yes,” Sowo says, gesturing encouragingly toward the water. “Walk into the water like you belong to it and cross to the other side. Kpanguima njabu lo.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, casting a nervous glance at the river.

“It means the Kpanguima is under the water. The Kpanguima is where women gather to feel safe, to be cleansed, to find peace and harmony. You won’t experience life in a real Kpanguima but if you cross the river to the other side, you’ll come as close to it as you can. You will visit the spirit realm and emerge changed.”

“Alright,” I say, my chest swelling with a wave of nervous hope. I long for this sisterhood, this fellowship of goodwill and good effort Sowo describes as the inheritance of Sande women. It is this longing that pulls my feet into the water and keeps me going until my head sinks below the surface. I keep walking, holding my breath as the soil beneath my feet slants into the depths of the river, and water enters my nostrils. I press on with swaying steps cutting across the river’s current. I know I am dreaming. I know I’ll not drown if I breathe, but a part of me wants to endure this hardship, feel this deprivation. I hold my breath and walk even as my lungs burn and I feel lightheaded. *Breathe, child.* Sowo speaks clearly in my mind. *You belong to the water. Let it cleanse and nourish you. Let it carry you to the other side.* I relax when I hear her voice and pull a breath in. Sweet, grass-scented air fills my lungs and suddenly I am no longer struggling against the current. The river wraps around me in a fluid embrace and I feel the water, cool and soothing, soaking through my clothes. It sluices over my skin, searching and touching every part of me. Suddenly, I remember how my mother used to bathe me when I was a baby. I remember the warm water, the gentle, intentional care in her touch, the love in her eyes. I feel all of this from the river as it gently floats me to the other side.

Soon enough, the soil slants upward and I feel my head break water. Eyes still closed, I walk until I feel grass under my feet. An effervescent feeling overcomes me, an elation I can't explain. I open my eyes and turn to look back at where I left Sowo standing. She is still there and she is dancing, her movements slow and languid, her garments swirling through the mist. When I look down at myself, I am completely dry. With a happy laugh I start to dance, matching my steps and movements to what I see Sowo doing across the river.

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When I wake up from the dream, I write everything Sowo told me in my diary. The memory of her dancing in the mist on the riverbank lingers in my mind so I write a poem.

*Sowo, mother who is perfect,  
Your demands are hard  
But I'll be better for following them.  
  
Sowo, my one example,  
Your demands are hard  
But I'll be better far them.  
  
Sowo, mother who is perfect,  
Let me dance the dawn dance with you.*

## 5.

Tingoi comes to me next. As Sowo predicted, I know who she is as soon as I see her. It is impossible not to see Tingoi. The first thing I notice is her skin. It is a sleek, silver metallic hue glimmering in the sunlight. I watch her deftly carve out a section of her jet-black hair with a wooden comb and twist it from her scalp down her body to where shiny skin morphs into grayish-brown scales. Her face is a study in symmetry and perfection: a smooth forehead lined with perfectly arched eyebrows, bright, brown eyes under thick lashes, high cheekbones, a perfectly positioned nose, and full sensuous lips. Her neck is ringed just as Clara said it would be and she wears nothing but a neckpiece made of cowries. The ornament drapes over the curve of her breasts and their creaminess contrasts perfectly with the silver of her skin, the jet-black of her hair, and the grayish-brown patterns of her scales. I can't tell if she has a fish or a snake tail. The lower part of her body dips into the water, stirring it lazily as she works. She is sitting on a mass of rocks on the banks of the same river from my previous dream. An ornate, silver mirror is on the rock nearest to her. My gaze drifts back to her face and I stare and stare. She is so impossibly beautiful, I can't tell whether I want to be her or I want to gather up her beauty like a tangible thing and keep it for myself.

“You can’t ever be me.” Her voice in my mind is melodious and kind even though her words are not. “No woman can be me.”

I am speechless.

“And you can’t keep me,” she continues, with a chuckle. “I am like sunrise or sunset. A flower in a field, fresh, new leaves

coming out of the ground. You admire my beauty where you find me and rejoice to have experienced it. Then you create it in your own self and in your own life, while being true to who you are. That is where true beauty lies.”

I still can’t speak. I watch, enraptured, as she carves out another section of hair and twists it down her body.

“You don’t have to be naturally beautiful or poised to have beauty and refinement in your life. These things can be learned.”

“I... I don’t have anyone to teach me,” I stutter. Tingoi throws her head back and laughs. The sound rings, clear as a bell, around the riverbank and across the water. As if in response, a light breeze rustles the leaves and I hear splashes as fish leap out of the river, glinting silver in the sunlight before plunging back into the water.

“Who do you think taught me?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I mutter. “Your mother?”

Tingoi laughs again and everything around us seems to laugh with her.

“The people have a saying: Luwu ma nyande, nyande ii le. This means ‘beauty on the skin is not beauty.’ True beauty starts with a good heart that wants to share what it is because it is something that other people will enjoy. You don’t create beauty in yourself and in your life for other people, but sharing it makes it sweeter.”

It makes sense. I know, for example, that the clean lines and symmetry of my cornrows are beautiful to look at. But each compliment I receive also makes me remember that it is Clara’s gift to me. It makes me feel even more beautiful.

“Beauty also needs confidence and trust in yourself that you are enough. That you have all you need to be who you are. Without that, it is shallow. That is why the people also say, Numu ee lo a numu ngi luwu ma.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, making up my mind to learn as many Mende proverbs as possible.

"It means 'No one loves a person on account of their appearance,'" Tingoi says, picking up the mirror and examining her work. She has just one section of hair left to twist. She returns the mirror to the rock and resumes twisting. "When they see me, most people think my beauty is what attracts them. But what attracts them is that I like myself. I like how I look when I make myself beautiful, and it shows. They want that for themselves. They want this beauty in their lives too. That is what I give them a chance to be a part of. The people who understand this know that they have to work with what they naturally have. The people who don't, try, and fail, to be me."

She finishes twisting the final section of her hair and lifts her arms to celebrate with a happy laugh while swinging the heavy fall of her hair back and forth. The sound of her laughter enhances the sounds all around us. The chirps and calls of the birds are louder and more symphonic. The wind rustles the grass and the leaves of the trees around us. Even the river seems to ripple in excitement and more fish leap joyously out of the water. I feel myself strain toward it all. Joy and delight bubble out of me and before I know it I am laughing with her.

"I like you, little girl," Tingoi says, smiling happily at me. "There is a lot I can teach you. Come back and see me when you are older. Have you heard?"

"I will," I say with a happy nod. I've never meant to keep a promise more in my life.

"And you must promise me one more thing," she continues with a sly smile.

"What?" I ask breathlessly. I would do anything for her.

"When you are as beautiful as you can make yourself, I want you to enjoy it. Enjoy being beautiful inside and out. Can you do that?"

I nod again.

“Good,” Tingoi says. She pauses for a breath and then the brightness of the day seems to dim as her smile turns sad. “And whatever you do, don’t put yourself on a pedestal. However you choose to pursue beauty, make it something people can come close to. Make it something people can touch. Make it something that can get dirty, that can fall from perfection and still be good, still be beautiful. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I nod solemnly. “I do.” And oddly enough, I do.

“I’m sure Gonde will tell you more about this when you see her.”

“Gonde?” I ask, confused.

“Yes, you are to go to her when we finish talking.”

“Where is she?” I ask, looking around. Tingoi looks across the river and gestures with her chin. When I follow the direction of her gaze, I see a figure standing on the other bank. She looks like Sowo but I don’t see the white scarf on her crest.

## 6.

I cross the river in that dream but wake up before I reach the other side. I write everything Tingoi told me in my diary and fall asleep again hoping I don't dream of Gonde. Of all the figures Clara mentioned, she seems the least interesting.

"She's funny and she helps us with dancing," Clara had said with an indulgent smile. "But she is not Sowo. Everybody wants to be like Sowo. Nobody wants to be like Gonde."

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, her mask is usually broken somewhere and her garments are dirty and torn. She is clumsy and nothing like what we are trying to become. She speaks without thinking and doesn't care too much what people think of her or say about her."

"Then why is she there?" I asked.

"I don't understand it fully myself," Clara admitted. "But she was kind to us when we were struggling and she made us laugh. It helped a lot."

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I don't say anything further to my mother about women's societies and, thankfully, she doesn't ask me about the book I claimed to have read. I settle into the rhythms of the holidays. My parents decide to enroll Sammy and I in holiday classes. He chooses a computer course and I choose German, mainly because I want access to the library at the German Cultural Center. Weeks go by and I still don't dream of Gonde. In the

meantime, I develop an obsession with the values Sowo shared with me. I write the words and their meanings—which I look up in the dictionary—in all my notebooks. Whenever I hear them mentioned anywhere, I pay close attention. I come to find out that unity and harmony, inner and outer strength, intelligence, diligence, persistence, bravery, courage, truth, endurance, and above all, goodness, are qualities that people all over the world value just as highly as the Mende do. It comforts me to know this. I also start paying closer attention to how I present myself. When my cornrows grow loose and rough with time, I ask my mother if I can get them done again.

“Your hair is longer now,” she says, stroking it approvingly.

“Do you want to relax it?”

I consider her request for a few minutes. Before I met Clara, I might’ve jumped at a chance to straighten my hair. But not so anymore. I want neatly done cornrows like Clara’s and tell my mother so. She takes me to her regular hair salon. It is busy when we arrive. The smell of hair oils mixes with the alkaline smells of hair relaxers, both threaded with the sweeter smells of the body lotions and perfumes wafting from the bodies of the women sitting in chairs, their hairstyles at various stages of completion. A television mounted high on the wall is playing video clips of old-school Cameroonian music and the room is alive with the sound of women’s laughter and chatter in English, French, and Pidgin. Aunty Solange, the owner, who normally does my mother’s hair, is busy with another customer so she assigns one of her girls to us. I request cornrows.

“You no want rasta?” the girl, who introduces herself as Raissa, asks encouragingly. I shake my head firmly no.

“Just cornrows, please.”

She sits me down in a low chair and stands behind me to work. Her hands are rough when she combs my hair and more than once I cry out in pain. She shushes me gently but

I can tell she is irritated as I keep yelping and wincing. My own irritation rises and tears prickle the back of my eyes. I want the warm and intimate experience Clara gave me. I want to place my head on her thigh, breathe in the coconut scent of her skin, and feel her hand gently rub the pain away when it hurts. I endure the ordeal, whispering *malondo is endurance* to myself. It's not long before Raissa is done. I rise quickly to my feet to look at myself in the mirror. My heart sinks in dismay as I understand why she'd asked if I wanted rasta braids instead. Her cornrows are sloppy. Some lines are not well-defined and the braids themselves are uneven in size. Tears gather in my eyes.

"You like it?" Raissa asks hopefully. She looks nervous and her eyes flit to my mother and Aunty Solange who are engrossed in a conversation with the woman whose hair Aunty Solange is braiding.

I start to shake my head no but stop, remembering what Sowo had said about Hindawanda, giving the best parts of myself. I know that if I say I don't like the style my mother would insist that the girl redo it, which meant I would have to endure another hour or two of pain. I definitely didn't want that. "It's nice," I say with a shaky smile. I know I made the right decision when relief floods Raissa's face.

"Thank you!" she whispers with a grateful smile. "Next time you come I'll plait you rasta."

I nod and turn to my mother who is now watching our exchange with a slight frown on her face. Aunty Solange looks in our direction and scowls. I walk over to my mother. "I really like the hair, Mama! Can we go home now?" I ask my question before she can say anything,

"Are you sure?" she asks gently, still frowning. Her head tilts to the side as she examines the cornrows, tracing an uneven line with a finger. "Maybe she can—"

“No, it’s fine,” I quickly interrupt her. “I like it as it is. Next time, I’ll do rasta.” I smile shakily at her then I look at Raissa who has come to stand near us, her eyes wide with fear. Aunty Solange starts talking in a language I don’t understand but I can tell from Raissa’s clenched jaw and glassy eyes that she is being reprimanded. I tug at my mother’s elbow. “Please, can we go?”

Still berating the girl, Aunty Solange accepts payment from my mother and we leave.

“You don’t really like the hair do you?” my mother asks as we pull into Douala traffic.

I shake my head no.

“Then why did you say you like it?” she asks. “Someone else could’ve fixed it.”

“I didn’t want to hurt her feelings and I also didn’t want them to redo it. It hurts.”

“I know,” my mother said with a chuckle. “You used to scream like a banshee when we tried to do anything to your hair when you were a baby. I was surprised that you did anything to it to begin with.”

“I can endure a little pain for a good reason,” I say.

My mother looks over at me in surprise. “That is a good attitude to have,” she says. “But pain is a limited teacher. If you can learn a lesson without pain, choose that option. I’ve seen too many women suffer needlessly because they think they need pain to learn important life lessons. If pain comes, let it be unavoidable. Do you understand?”

I nod, thinking about Mansarico.

“Did you ever remember the book you were reading that talked about schools for women?”

I shake my head no, feeling guilty about lying to my mother. I feel a pinprick of pain in my head and sigh. I know I’ll dream about Gonde tonight.

"I've been thinking about what you said," my mother continues. "No one really taught me how to be a woman. My mother told me some things but a lot has changed from when she was a young woman. I also spent a long time in England for school and then for work so things have been different for me. But since you said what you said, I started thinking about the women I know who have close relationships with their mothers. They seem so much more grounded than I feel. I want us to have that. It's just the two of us, after all."

She sounds so earnest I suddenly want to hug her tightly.

"I asked a friend of mine who studied anthropology," she continues. "She told me you probably read something about finishing schools for girls. Does that sound familiar?"

"What is anthropology?" I ask.

"It is a field of study where people look at the evolution of human behavior and culture. So they study why people are the way they are and do the things they do."

"Oh ..." I murmur, resolving to read as much about anthropology as I can.

"So was it finishing schools you read about?" my mother presses. "Those schools that women go to and learn manners and dancing and things like that."

"It might've been something like that," I say.

"I see. Well, they used to have those in Europe and other parts of the world but it was mostly just preparing rich girls for marriage. They taught them how to behave in public and take care of a home so they don't embarrass their husbands." She laughs.

"They didn't teach the girls how to be united with each other? And values like inner and outer strength, intelligence, diligence, persistence, bravery, courage, truth, endurance, and goodness?"

My mother looks over at me again in surprise when I rattle off the words.

"That's quite the list," she says. "Where did you get that from?"

"I read about it too, somewhere, I say with less enthusiasm.

"You really have to start sharing some of your books with me," she chuckles. "I don't know. I'm sure the girls had church and school where they went to learn these other things. Finishing schools really just prepared them to find rich husbands. Some of the schools taught academic subjects and foreign languages but that was secondary to things like etiquette and deportment."

"Thank you for asking about it, Mama," I say, deciding that Sande school was much more interesting than these etiquette schools for rich girls.

"That's alright, my dear," she replies. We are pulling into the side road that leads to our house. "And if you have any questions about being a woman, you can ask me. If I don't know, I'll ask someone who does."

---

I'm a bit disoriented when I find myself on the riverbank again. My heart plummets into my belly when I realize it is time to meet Gonde. I look around but I don't see her so I wait. She arrives in the same way Sowo did but her approach is much less elegant. She flails in the water and wades out leaving a wet trail on the grass as she staggers past me. I look her over and see that everything Clara said is true. The crest of her mask is broken off and scratches mar the smooth perfection of her brow. The helmet is cracked, and a jagged line cuts across the ring neck. Her garment is disheveled and soaked with water. It looks like some of the raffia is beginning to rot.

"Ngi pimblili gaa, ngi panbala nga, ngi tea fee, ngi njea fee, ngi gbanhangha." I don't understand the words but the

voice that speaks them jolts me with shock. Gonde sounds like my mother.

“Mama?” I ask hesitantly, my heart racing.

“Aren’t you going to ask what my words mean?” Gonde asks. I remain silent.

“I have danced far and wide,” she says. “I have danced round and round, I have leapt into the air, I have sunk into the ground, but now, I give up.”

I stay silent.

“You don’t think very highly of your mother,” Gonde says. It’s strange hearing her talk about my mother with my mother’s voice.

“I love my mother very much,” I say defensively.

“I know you do,” Gonde says. “But you don’t respect her as much as you respect Lydia Gulama.”

“They are very different,” I say evasively.

“You can admit it, you know,” Gonde says, starting to walk along the riverbank.

Reluctantly, I fall in step with her. “They are quite different. But you must always remember that your mother is your mother. She is trying to do her best for you. She deserves your respect. Don’t elevate another woman over her.”

I start to feel guilty.

“Ah... guilt,” Gonde chuckles. “I know a lot about guilt. Do you want to know the thing about guilt? It does nothing for you beyond showing you where you can do better. Same thing with shame. When you feel guilt or shame about something you do, ask yourself where you can do better and then do it.”

“Is that what you do?” I ask her.

“Ngi gbanhangaa,” she says gaily. “I’ve given up. Now, I exist as a reminder of what you can become if you try and you don’t succeed.”

“A failure,” I say.

“If you want to call it that,” Gonde says agreeably. “But tell me this. Who would you rather point out the ways in which you fall short? A “failure” like me who can also laugh with you about it and encourage you, or Sowo?”

I think about it for a few minutes. I want Sowo to teach me but I also know I would be crushed if she rebuked me strongly.

“Exactly,” Gonde says, doing a little dance. She slides on the muddy bank and lands on her behind. The sound is loud in the quiet forest and she bursts into raucous laughter before holding out her hand for me to help her stand. I can’t even imagine dignified Sowo in her position.

“Sowo would never fall down,” Gonde says, reading my mind as adeptly as the others had. “Tingoil might fall down but you would simply fall down and roll in the mud with her because she would make it look beautiful.” Gonde laughs and I laugh with her because I know she is right. I am warming up to Gonde after all.

“Tingoil seems to like you,” Gonde teases. “What did she say to you?”

“She told me not to try to be like her,” I say. “She told me to find beauty in myself and for myself and then be generous with it. She said I should always make sure my beauty is something people can come close to. Something that can get dirty and fall from perfection but still be good and beautiful. She said you would tell me more about this.”

Gonde stops walking when I say the last part.

“She said that?” she asks, her voice soft with some emotion I can’t identify.

“She did,” I confirm.

“Aah, Tingoi!” Gonde murmurs in gentle delight. “Tingoil ngi beengo!”

“I know what that means!” I exclaim. “It means she really knows what she is doing!”

“Aah! You are a mendemo now, eh?” Gonde laughs.

“I wish I was,” I say. “Then I could go to Sande school.”

Gonde stops walking and looks down at me. I look up at her disfigured mask and realize that my apprehension has truly melted away.

“Your friend told you that she doesn’t understand why I am at Sande school when all I do is make mistakes or make them laugh with my antics.” Her voice is serious and quiet. “Do you want to know why I am there?”

I nod.

“I am there because Sande school can be difficult. It’s different now and it will continue to change but in the past it was even more difficult. Not all the girls made it.”

I start to ask her what she meant by “made it” but stop myself. I don’t want to know the answer.

“Even today, there are many things that are still difficult for the women, things we know now that we didn’t know when we made some of the rules. It is a good organization but it is not perfect. Remember what your mother said about pain?”

I nod again.

“If you can learn a lesson without pain, choose that option first. If pain comes, let it be unavoidable.” Gonde repeats my mother’s words in my mother’s voice.

“Let the people to whom Sande belongs worry about Sande,” Gonde says. “You have learned some important things because your friend Clara is a Sowei at heart, but she acted beyond her authority when she agreed to do what she did with you. Take what you have learned and grow from it. Teach your daughters if you have any. Maybe you’ll start your own Sande school.”

Heat flushes my body at the gentle rejection in her words.

“But remember,” Gonde says kindly, reaching out to touch my face gently. She has my mother’s arm and hand. “You

belong to the Kpanguima in your own way. You still have a place in the community. Do you understand?”

I nod a third time.

“Good,” Gonde says. “It is time to wake up.”

---

I wake up in a hospital room. My body feels like a heavy stone pressing into the bed. My skin feels hot and damp and my sheets are soaked with sweat. My mouth feels like it is stuffed full of sour-tasting cotton. My head feels loose and light, with a slight echo of pain. It feels like some higher force has taken hold of it and squeezed. Disoriented, I look around. The room is empty, but I can see my mother’s purse in a chair.

“Mama?” I croak.

*The End.*

# Poetry



# Oum Hani

*Unspecified, Morocco*

Mountains of Chaouen, look on us with mercy  
Djinns of the Mountains, forgive us our sins  
You are slow to speak, they think you are mute  
You are slow to move, they think you are dead  
They come with pickaxes, deadly and sharp  
To cut in your body, to dig at your soul  
They come with pickaxes, Chaieb among them  
Chaieb my beloved, Chaieb my friend

*Hello! I ask my beloved  
Why do you wound the mountain?  
See you not its heart?  
Fear you not its wrath?  
It is slow to speak but it is not mute  
One day it will roar, then what will you do?  
It is slow to move, but it is not dead  
One day it will shake, then what will you do?*

*The mountain has no soul*, Chaieb says  
But what does he know?

*Its entrails are stone*  
But what does he know?

*The mountain has no soul*, he says  
But what does he know?

*It can't know suffering*  
But what does he know?

I, Oum Hani, I know what is real  
I know the mountain is alive  
Its hair is the forest, but he doesn't see  
The spring and the rivers, the blood of its veins  
The rocks are its bones, but he doesn't see  
Fear the Mountains, O Chaieb!  
Fear you its wrath  
Beware its anger, but he doesn't listen  
They shake the foundations Allah has laid  
Rattling the mountain's bones  
They play dinifri with earth's pillars  
The mountains fall, and people die  
Mountains of Chaouen, they grabbed your horns  
You roared loud, you shook with anger  
The boulder came crashing down  
You caught Chaieb in your grasp

Mektoub, a cruel thing  
Destiny, its sneering brother  
My heart stumbled, my spirit stuttered  
Mother don't tell me Chaieb is dead!  
Sisters don't tell me it is fate!  
Allah, wipe this imprint off my forehead!  
Let me see my beloved again  
Chaieb, I will say your name

Last night I dreamed of the mountains  
In my feverish grief, they came to me  
I saw what had been done to them  
Heads stripped of hair, a face with no nose  
Missing arms, twisted legs  
Open veins with bitter blood  
They marched toward the village  
Their breaths a fiery howl

I fell to my knees and begged them  
*They don't know that you too are Believers*  
*They don't know that you laugh*  
*That you sing, that you dance*  
*That you stroke the clouds with your hands*  
*They don't know that you love the birds*  
*And lizards in your crags*  
*And goats who climb your back*

*But I know that you're alive*  
*I know that the Prophet Jesus heard you weep*  
*When you saw your bodies used as altars*  
*To Gods other than Allah*  
*They don't know that you too are Believers*  
*Forgive them their sins*  
*Mountains of Chaouen, look on them with mercy*  
*Djinns of the Mountains, forgive them their sins*

But onward, they marched  
Despite my pleas  
Intent on vengeance  
And who can blame them?  
But still I begged, tossing, and turning  
Screaming and feverish

So close to death's door  
But hoping and praying

The readers of the holy Koran came  
The mountains paused their advance  
They repented their anger  
They spoke with voices, gentle  
*Your faith has helped us see, sister*  
*To you we promise this:*  
*You will see your beloved again*  
*You will see Chaieb before you die*

A green twig for you, Chaieb, my lover  
A branch of everlasting flowers  
I swear fidelity to you forever  
A pitcher of milk and some incense  
A small offering, Djinns of the Mountains  
I beg you don't be angry with my presence  
You are slow to speak, but you are not mute  
You are slow to move, but you are not dead

For still they come with their pickaxes  
Tall and strong they come  
To cut in your body, to dig at your soul  
O ever patient Mountains of Chaouen, look on them with mercy  
Djinns of the Mountains, forgive them their sins  
Mountains of Chaouen, look on me with mercy  
Let me see my beloved again  
Chaieb, I will say your name

Time has passed and now I am old  
And still I come, even though I'm slow  
A pitcher of milk and some incense  
A small offering for you, Sidi Chemharouch

Great and dreadful Djinn of the high peaks  
 War has come, and more strangers with it  
 Invaders with no care for Chaouen  
 Or love for its mountains

They have done them the worst kind of surgery  
 Blasting open their chests, tunneling into their hearts  
 May Allah curse them! May He not spare them!  
 Mountains of Chaouen, show them no mercy  
 Djinns of the Mountains, remember their sins  
 But look on me with mercy, O Djinn of the Mountain  
 Let me see my beloved again  
 Chaieb, I will say your name

Mektoub, a cruel thing  
 Destiny, its sneering brother  
 When I see the crowd gathered around the ditch  
 On my way down from my pilgrimage  
 When I see the body  
 My heart stumbles, my spirit stutters  
 Allah, not another one dead!  
 O his poor mother!

*Was there an accident?*  
*No, Mother Hani, come and see*  
 It is a body we found buried as we dug the ditch  
 When I see the face, O Allah's Prophet!  
 Mountains of Chaouen, you've shown me your mercy  
 I see my beloved, preserved from decay  
 Chaieb, I say your name, my heart sings, my spirit soars  
 Chaieb, I say your name, and soar home to you

*The End*



# Praise The Queens, Praise The Women\*

*Northwest Region, Cameroon*

Praise the queens, praise the women  
Praise them where before we failed them  
Speak about the ways they helped us  
Speak aloud the ways they blessed us  
Speak, children of the grassfields  
Speak about the ones they killed  
Speak about the fearless leaders  
Speak about the peerless seers  
Speak about the guardian spirits  
Speak about the firsts to do it  
  
Speak, children of the grassfields  
Speak of Mother Ndieu-ala'a  
Ndieu-ala'a who first saw land

Ndieu-ala'a who crossed the stream  
Speak of Ndieu-ala'a denied  
Speak of councilors who lied  
Speak of Ndieu-ala'a who cried  
Speak of Ndieu-ala'a who died

Speak, children of the grassfields  
Speak of Mother Ngonnso  
From Tikar with her followers  
Ambitious like her brothers  
See how they tried to stop her  
Over at Mape river  
She was a problem solver  
Yennso, Nso's Great Mother

Speak, children of the grassfields  
Speak of Mother Nahnyonga  
Mother of Bali Nyonga  
One sister of six brothers  
Speak of Gawolbe's daughter  
Speak of Doh Bani's power  
Speak of Nyongpasi's mother  
Nahnyonga, dynasty founder

Speak, children of the grassfields  
Speak of Mother Nandong  
Who led her migrant people  
From Ndobo to Foumban  
Then Bamessi to Nso  
Then Jottin to Ajang  
And then on to Laikom  
Walking the python path

Speak, children of the grassfields  
Speak of your Mother Nyianya  
Nyianya, the Ntul's Ancestress  
Nyianya, Mother of Magic  
Nyianya, Mother of Medicine  
Nyianya, Mother of Iron  
Nyianya, the first Queen  
Nyianya, Namer of Kings

Speak, children of the grassfields  
Speak of Ma Mangieh  
Ma Mangieh of the Five  
Who will ever survive  
Ma Mangieh of the Rock  
Which words open and lock  
Ma Mangieh Stone of Peace  
And Fieh Lunglwe's relief

Speak, children of the grassfields  
Speak well of Mama Ngum  
Palm wine house pioneer  
Astute entrepreneur  
The very first to do it  
She helped others to profit  
Which brought resolve to conflict  
No Bamenda without it

Praise the queens, praise the women  
Praise them where before we failed them  
Speak about the ways they helped us  
Speak aloud the ways they blessed us  
Speak, children of the grassfields  
Speak about the ones they killed

Speak about the fearless leaders  
Speak about the peerless seers  
Speak about the guardian spirits  
Speak about the firsts to do it

*The End*

# The Pretty Girl Who Had No Teeth

*Venda, South Africa*

Old Thikhathali's sons were three  
Who roamed their homestead wild and free  
But one day, to them, he said  
*It's high time you lot were wed*  
But there was no cause to worry  
He had a plan, Old Thikhathali!  
He'd been waiting all his life  
To pair his precious sons with wives

To the eldest son he said  
*I know the one who you will marry*  
*A girl of unparalleled beauty!*  
*She cooks, she cleans, she's strong, not lean*  
*And the right age from what I gleaned*

*This is what you have to do  
If you have a girl to woo  
To her homestead you must go  
So that you can make her know  
Take some gifts, not one or two  
Take some healthy cattle too  
Leave as soon as tomorrow  
Leave with haste, do not go slow*

The eldest did as he was told  
For he knew though he was old  
His dear father sure could see  
What was best for their family  
When he got to the homestead  
And saw the girl he meant to wed  
He was very glad to see  
That she was pretty as could be  
And when his plan, her parents heard  
They were simply delighted!  
Yes, of course, we will agree  
To have her join your family!  
Happy, proud, and feeling great  
The young man told his bride: why wait?  
Let us return right away  
To the place where we shall stay  
They took off at dawn's first light  
Just as morning birds took flight  
As they watched their fluttering wings  
The bride-to-be began to sing  
But her song was strange and sad  
Despite the lovely voice she had

So, with his troubled heart masked  
The eldest turned to her and asked  
*What is it, this song you sing?*  
*Which such heaviness should bring?*  
*Such sad notes, such dire tone!*  
*Makes my heart feel like a stone*  
*It's only right! Was her reply*  
*That my song might make one cry*  
*It tells the woe that I come with*  
*Which is that I have no teeth*

The eldest laughed but then he frowned  
At the news, the girl announced  
Then he decided to look  
Just in case this was no joke  
*Open your mouth and let me see*  
*For this, surely, can't be!*  
But when he looked, he saw the truth  
Two black lumps, not a single tooth!  
With widened eyes and pounding heart  
The young man jumped back with a shout  
*Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear me!*  
*What we planned is not to be!*  
*There's no way I could possibly*  
*Take you to my family!*  
*There's nothing left for us to do*  
*Back to your people you must go*

After seeing her returned  
And taking back his gifts in turn  
The eldest came home with head bent  
And sought his father out to vent  
*That girl you would have me marry*

*Ill luck the poor thing does carry!  
For all the promise she comes with  
Fades when you see she has no teeth*

The second son wasn't deterred  
For he thought his brother erred  
*I'll go, myself, to see  
If she might be the wife for me  
Her beauty is hard to resist!  
Go with gifts if you insist*  
This is what his father said  
As he gave his go ahead  
When he arrived with gift bags filled  
The girl's parents were simply thrilled!  
Confident he would succeed  
They very readily agreed  
And what's more, the girl said yes!  
She even wore her best dress  
And followed meekly as he led  
Walking toward her new homestead

But you must know, just as before  
The pretty girl had more in store  
As, silently, they walked along  
She once again broke out in song  
The young man listened and was pleased  
But with sorrow his heart was seized  
For while he knew not what she sang  
It had a melancholy twang  
*What is this song that you sing?  
Which with so much grief does ring?  
What has it to do  
With such a pretty girl as you?*

*Everything! Was her reply  
And since I know you'll ask me why  
My secret I must now forfeit  
It is that I have no teeth!*

Thinking of his brother's plight  
Wondering if he had been right  
The young man asked if he could see  
They made a stop under a tree  
And so it was that, once again  
Thikhathali's son had worked in vain  
For he saw her claim was true  
And there was nothing he could do  
*Such a pity! Was all he said  
When he returned to their homestead  
The pretty girl opens her mouth  
And the sun sets in the south!*

Now, it seemed that there would be  
No chance for Thikhathali  
And the one hope he'd had in life  
To have this girl as a son's wife  
So he was just pleased as can be  
When he turned around to see  
His third son coming to him  
With eyes aglow with mischief's gleam  
For this son, though he was young  
Had a heart with wisdom strong  
And even with a brilliant mind  
He was always warm and kind  
*We both know something is wrong  
Not with the girl, but with her song  
Let me take my turn and try  
To find the reason why*

And so, he left, his journey blessed  
By his father who confessed  
That he also was convinced  
There was more than was evinced  
With faith that he'd come out on top  
The third son walked and didn't stop

So, he arrived at sunrise  
To the family's surprise  
*Surely, he too has not come*  
*Just to return where he is from*  
*Without the thing he came to seek?*  
*Let us hear of what he'll speak*  
But the thing they couldn't know  
Was that the young man didn't follow

The rules and customs that should be  
So, he had to make them see  
Before their astonished eyes  
And their gently murmured "whys?"  
The third son found himself a seat  
And called the girl with him to sit

First, he asked her how she fared  
Then joked on how he'd come prepared  
And soon enough she was at ease  
Laughing as she took the tease  
And when he asked her if she wished  
To see it properly finished  
The business that had brought him there  
All who were there were stunned to hear  
The girl with her own mouth declare  
That the young man to her was dear

And that she wanted nothing more  
Than to be his forevermore!

And so, it was decided  
Her parents were so excited!  
The couple didn't want to wait  
They left before it got too late  
They left as the sun found the west  
As evening birds called out for rest  
And their journey was made faster  
By happy and playful banter  
But when they stopped to get some rest  
The pretty girl started her test

With lilting voice and sad, sad sound  
She sang her fell song clear and loud  
Though knowing not a word she said  
The young man questioned, enchanted  
*Tell me why a pretty girl  
Sings songs with which sadness swirls?  
Oh, this is how it must be!  
For the song, it speaks of me  
And the great load that I bear  
A secret which I now must share  
You may not see it while I speak  
But I swear it is no trick,  
Right where I should have my teeth  
I have black lumps, soft as pith  
Oh, you mean those little things?  
Don't you worry, my poor darling!  
I saw them when first you spoke  
I know my brothers didn't joke  
It doesn't change a thing for me*

*Your smile is still sweet as can be  
Come now, let's be on our way!  
We don't want to waste the day*

And so, they continued their walk  
And though she watched, he didn't sulk  
Now confident his love was strong  
She once again returned to song  
She sang of a kindhearted man  
The one who stayed when others ran  
And so sweet was her harmony  
They both danced to the melody

Soon they reached a nice cool stream  
And stopped to drink and maybe swim  
But as they stood in its center  
The young man suddenly grabbed her  
When her mouth opened wide to scream  
He dipped her down into the stream  
While using his other free hand  
To gather up soft river sand

Right into her mouth it went  
And even though she was hellbent  
To free herself from his tight grip  
Her camouflage began to slip  
He watched with a satisfied grin  
As her teeth became more clean  
And soon he saw them as he'd thought  
Straight and white just as they ought  
*Oh please! Don't be angry!*  
*There's cause for my duplicity!*  
*I decided that I must wed*

*A man who thinks using his head  
And so I had to verify  
Every suitor who came by  
Which makes me happy I could find  
A man like you who's good and kind*

A happy twinkle in his eye  
Her sweetheart brushed aside her lie  
He very well could understand  
Why she took such an extreme stand  
And this is how Thikhathali  
Achieved his great goal finally!  
The third son and the girl were wed  
Which brought much joy to the homestead

(What of the brothers, you might wonder?  
Well, first, their eyes grew dark with thunder  
Which quickly became peals of laughter!)

*The End*



# The Sacred Spring

*Ibibio, Nigeria*

Do you know what Adiah Anwa did for her daughter?  
Do you know what she did to save her?  
A thing that could only come from the heart of a mother!  
She went to the water to save her  
She went on Akwa Ederi, that special day, you see?  
When no one but unmarried girls could go there by decree  
She took her jar upon her head, walked that perilous path  
Ready to sacrifice herself by facing Idemm's wrath  
How did it come to this? Why did she do this thing?  
Open your ears and listen to the song that I'll sing

Eduok Adiah Ekkpo had trouble in his house  
He had two wives and neither one cared for the other spouse  
Nwa Udo the senior wife, was tall and strong and stern  
And there wasn't a single thing she couldn't do or learn  
Nwa Udo was always calm, but everybody knew  
That those to whom she'd extend help were very, very few

Adiah, the junior wife, was sweet, kind, and fair  
And even though she did it slow, she always did her share  
She worked the farms and caught the fish and hung them  
    up to smoke  
And people loved her water jars because they never broke  
Gentle Adiah Anwa embraced all who drew near  
She wrapped them tight and held them in the circle of her care  
*Daughter of the Climbing Palm, Flower Child*, they called her  
A doting mother devoted to her one and only daughter  
So, when this precious child took ill, Adiah couldn't sit still  
She turned left and she turned right, and searched with all  
    her might  
Morning, noon, and night, to end her daughter's plight  
She wouldn't rest until she knew her daughter was alright  
She gave the child some medicine, strong ibok ukanyin  
She prayed and knocked on heaven's door and cried *Abasi do!*  
She begged the mme ndem for mercy, she asked them for pity  
But they turned deaf ears to her cries, their silence was stony  
She prayed, bargained, and begged, and cried until her eyes  
    turned red  
Her every moment marked with dread at the thought of  
    her child dead  
But still the child's skin burned to touch, it soon was all too much  
Adiah made her last request with the child's limp hand clutched  
*Take her then, the woman cried. It's better if she died!*  
*At least she'll be there by your side, with ikaan she'll reside!*

Nwa Udo observed her pain aloof like you won't believe  
She never once thought could offer help or some relief  
To her each day was like the next, she wasn't moved to bother  
She worked her farms and sold her wares and lived without  
    a care

Time went on and soon it came, that very special time

When to go and fetch water was a very serious crime  
But oh! It was on that same day the child found strength to say  
*My throat burns, I thirst, mother. Some water if I may!*  
Adiaha cried in dismay when she looked into her pot  
The empty depths revealed to her the one thing she forgot  
*I waited far too long! she wailed I waited for too long!*  
*Now there's no water in my pot to make my daughter strong!*  
She knew her co-wife would be peeved, would think of her  
a thief  
But Adiaha was beyond care and that's what made her dare  
Nwa Udo's water reached the brim, so maybe she could skim  
A little bit just off the top, enough to fill a cup  
But as soon as she took the cup to give her child a drink  
Nwa Udo walked into the room and made Adiaha shrink  
*I saw you touch my waterpot! I saw just what you did!*  
*So now you must go to the spring and make sure it's refilled!*  
*When the head of the house is out, that's when the servant thinks*  
*That she can take her useless self to the waterpot to drink!*  
Nothing Adiaha could say would change her co-wife's mind  
She saw then that Nwa Udo had no plan to be kind  
Her heart beating fast in her chest Adiaha faced her test  
She prayed to Abasi above and filled her steps with love  
She left the compound carrying her very finest jar  
And turned her feet toward the spring, which wasn't very far

But as she walked the empty roads on this forbidden day  
The wind began to stir the air and trees began to sway  
And as she tried to walk right past her family's totem  
The Palm Tree stretched out big branches, blocking her  
path with them  
This gave Adiaha quite the scare, her eyes filled up with tears  
But she knew from the tree's actions her ancestors were near

She thought of doing what was best and turning back  
toward home  
But chose instead to state her case, her child's need urged  
her on:

*I know that this is Idemm's day, I shouldn't go to the water  
But yesterday I could fetch none, because of my sick daughter  
I begged my co-wife for a cup, but she wouldn't give a thing  
So now, I pray you, clear the road and let me reach the spring*

Struck by her sincerity the Palm Tree showed mercy  
It swept its branches off the road, granting her amnesty  
Adiahā bowed her head in thanks and continued her path  
Relieved that she hadn't incurred her family totem's wrath  
But further down along the way at a bend in the road  
She stopped in fear some steps from where Idemm's great  
leopard stood  
She turned to run but realized her lack of courage meant  
Her child would die, and she would still face Nwa Udo's contempt  
*My heart is in my mouth, she thought, but I must do my best  
And maybe like the tree this too is just another test*  
So she turned back and came to stand before the mighty beast  
And hoped that as she sang it wouldn't mistake her for a feast:

*I know that this is Idemm's day, I shouldn't go to the water  
But yesterday I could fetch none, because of my sick daughter  
I begged my co-wife for a cup, but she wouldn't give a thing  
So now, I pray you, clear the road and let me reach the spring*

The leopard snarled and showed its fangs and swished its  
lengthy tail  
But her soft voice was very sweet, so Adiahā prevailed  
The leopard stepped aside and gave a deep and rumbling purr

Then settled down to rest and lick its finely speckled fur  
Adiahah breathed her thanks again and continued on her way  
Trying not to look back where the fearsome leopard lay

Finally she stood before the people's Sacred Spring  
She bowed her head, and calmed her fear, and raised her  
voice to sing:

*I know that today is your day, I shouldn't have come for water  
But yesterday I could fetch none, because of my sick daughter  
I begged my co-wife for a cup, but she wouldn't give a thing  
So now, I pray you, let me carry water from the spring Idemm,  
Giver of Children, to you we give our daughters  
Hear my plea and have mercy on this desperate mother*

No sooner had she sung those words than did the waters stir  
And from the swirling depths arose the water spirit fair

*Come, my child, Great Idemm sang, you have nothing to fear  
Fill your jar with what you need, your love has brought you far  
And when you go, do take with you these gifts from my own hand  
Calm your heart and wipe your tears, I see and understand*

How great the joy Adiahah felt, her gratitude grew wings  
It flew with her as she walked home, making even birds sing

She filled Nwa Udo's pot back up, she gave her back her cup  
She poured it in with steady hands, she didn't lose a drop  
But Nwa Udo wasn't concerned with water just restored  
Her envious gaze was fixed on the gifts in Adiahah's store

*I must go and claim a piece of all I see in there  
Idemm is my totem, so I know she has my share!*

She took her jar and left the house, rushing and unheeding  
And had no care though what she did was strictly forbidden  
The Palm Tree waved its branches, but it let her pass unbothered  
The leopard gave a lazy snarl but let her pass unhindered  
And soon enough Nwa Udo stood before the Sacred Spring  
Too out of breath to speak, or even try to sing  
Without a word of thanks, or even a greeting  
She dipped her jar into the pool, breath held expectantly

All was quiet for a bit but then the waters swirled  
And rose up in a fearsome wave which pulled her in their swell  
The woman strove to free herself but that didn't go so well  
The water held her in its grasp, and Idemm spoke at last

*Nwa Udo, you claim my name but bring me so much shame  
Now you shall die with nothing but your own envy to blame  
Your actions are not worthy of those who I call my seed,  
You co-wife came in dire need, but all you bring is greed*

So now you know what Adiahia Anwa did for her daughter  
Now you know exactly what she did for her daughter  
She shared her heart and lived her faith and gave love to others  
She always did her very best, and that is how she saved her

*The End*

# Asáŋasáŋa idim

*“The Sacred Spring” Ibibio Translation by Ubong Edison*

Amediójó sé Adiaha Anwa aké-anam ano adiaha amó?  
Amediójó sé enye aké anam adi-nyañah eyen amó?  
Adiaha Anwa aké-nam, mkpó aké otoho ima esit eka eyen ikpónj...  
Adiaha Anwa aké ka idim adi-nyañah eyen,  
Ka sé ké akpan usen akwa ederi, ke enye akeká idim.  
Usen mbed akpanah offriowo ndi ka idim, mmibehike  
nkaiferi ikpónj.

Adiaha Anwa ama obiom abaj ke ibiot asaŋa isaj ukut, ke ntak ibout enyen kiet. Abeŋé-idem adi-wa idem, nyuŋbó ubium-ikpe ndem isonj. Nso ikimen ami idi? Nso ikinam adiaha anam uto mkpo ami? Ekpaŋ-utoŋ enyuŋ ekop ikwó ake nkwhó.

Eduok Adiaha Ekkpo ake nie mfannah ufók.  
Eduok ake ado adó iban iba, ndien iban-ufip eduok ema esua idem ammo.

Nwa Udo, akpa anwan, ake do ayán, okpósónj-odudu iban.

Iniehe se enye mmikikana ikpeb, mme nndinam.  
Nwa Udo ama suhóre-idem, ndien offriowo ema edionjó ke  
iwaka, mme owo se anye akeme isin uwam inó. Sia enye ake  
doho “ayie-idem ndiok edu”.

Adiahá Anwa, udiana-anwan, ake ado uyai eti awonwan.  
Okposuk-ado nte anye, mmi ki sapakeidem, anye amadiojó  
mme utom-inwaj, ukó-iyak, ye adiwan-iyak.  
Offriowo ye obio enyuŋ ema abaŋ-mmoŋ Adiahá Anwa,  
koro akananam abaŋ-mmoŋ Adiahá Anwa ibomoké.

Adiahá Anwa ake mama offriowo, akpan-akpan mbon si-  
kpere enye idem, ndien mme owo ese ekod enye ntik-ayiŋ  
nte “adiahá atuakeyop”, ye “uyai eyen”.

Adiahá Anwa ake ado ata eti eka ano ikponj- ikpoŋ eyene  
amo. Ndien Kini idem adidioke eyen, eka-eyen ikana itie,  
itie-kiet ise.

Eka enyen, ama oyom usoboh ke nnasia ye ke ufien, aka  
ke offiong ye ke utin, oyom ke okoneyo ye uwemeyo, oyom  
ke offri odudu amo, koro ima esit eka, iki-iyak anye aduok  
odudu. Adiahá Anwa ama ano eyen, mme nsiosio ibok-  
mbakara ye ibok ukaj-nyen. Enyen abojakam okood abasi  
ke enyoŋ, onyuŋ ótójóntak ayem iso ndem isonj, ate etua imo  
mbom. Koro owo “nnan-enyin asiyime enang ekom”. Akam  
ukut ye mmoŋ-eyet amo ikimene nsoŋ-idem isok eyen.

Adiahá Anwa ama tua-eyet tutu eyen adat, idem amem,  
iboho ndoŋesit iyuŋjó ikop emem. Akere naja enyen abi  
bokho ikpa. Nte usen aboyoke, adiahá ama duok idoroeyen  
ke idem ayen aya osong. Mmem idem ama duk idem ayen,  
eka atie abed usen mkpa ayen. Adiahá asiomkpo atua ate  
“mkpa dimen eyen do, yak ake bo emem ke obioekpo.” Imo  
ima ikpa, iya iki-ikid enyen ke obio ekpo.

Akpa anwan, Nwa Udo iki-bibkpe nwan-ufíp amo ibo anamdie? Nsido? Afid ukut ye ubiak udójó eyen, Adiaha Anwa ake bo ikpoṇ. Nwa Udo asuk oduṇ ke ufot kiet nte mkpo idoho, akaka inwang onyuṇ ayam udua ke usen ke usen, iwama iyujó, ibebib se-itipe ino nwan-amo.

Ke ini ye usen ama ke boyo, ádikem akpan usen mbed uka idim, kpasuk ku usen ado ke eyen Adiaha Anwa adikpe idem, adakada ke nna udójó. Asio uyo akood eka ate “mma nnó mmój nwój”.

Adiaha Anwa asiomkpo kini okukpoke abaŋ, mmój ndomokiet ibaha. Abang ama asat, koro udójó eyen amana Adiaha Anwa afre adika idim.

Adiaha Anwa asiomkpo mmong ibaha ke abaŋ se nnó eyen awoŋ. Mmebed uka idim anye kpene, idahami mmój ibaha ke'ufok.

Adiaha Anwa amadiójó ke nwan-amó aya ayatesit, aya ikood imo ino, ado iki'kpana enye adi bo mmój ke abaŋ Nwa Udo, nno eyen awoŋ, koro mmój ama-oyoho abaŋ Nwa Udo.

Ke enye adisuk nnó eyen mmój awój, Nwa Udo asaŋa óduk ufok, abub Adiaha Anwa nte, “mmekid se afo ama”, nso-inam abo mmój ke abaŋ mmój mmi? “Dakkada idaha-mi, di ka idem, di yoho abaŋ mmój mi”, “koro nnyin ibuana idim, nnyin ibuanake abang” “Asido anie-ufok ama adaka, ndisime eyen-ufok ake tuk abaŋ mmój”.

Adiaha Anwa ama kpe nwan-ufíp amó ubók. Iniehe se enye mmikitaja, ado Nwa Udo ikikopo, iyujó ikpuhó esit.

Kini Adiahia Anwa akite ke Nwa Udo ikokpo mkpe-ubok immó, iyuŋjó inie esit mbom. Adiahia Anwa adakkada ke uko, abój akam anó Abasi, ate adad imó usung, amen ata eti abaŋ mmóiŋ amó obiom, amen isaŋ adaka idim, koro idim ama kpere ufók.

Ndien nte anye asanjake ke'usuŋ, ikite owo ndomo'kiet, koro usen akwa ederi, ake do usen mbed uka idim. Nte enye asanjake, ofum amen eto, ye nkók-eto. Adiahia Anwa asanja abóhó itie uwa m kpó-ufók amó akwa eto-eyop, ndien eto-eyop ama asio nkók-eto abiójó Adiahia Anwa, ate akuboyo. Ndik amum Adiahia, mmoŋ-eyet ayuŋ óyóhó anye éyen koro anye amadiójó, ke edinam eto awójó ke mme ikaan ufók-ammó ekpere anye idem.

Ekikere atimmede Adiahia, mme imó ikpe ka iso, mme ikpetime edem inyoŋ ufók....ado ekikere eyen anó enye uko ndi sio uyo, ntaŋ-ikó nte "Ami mmediójó ke mfin ado usen ndem-isoj, ikpinaha ami nka idim, ado ke ntak ndiók-idem eyen-mi, ami nkikana nka idim ku usen edem, ndien mmekpe nwan-nnyin ubok nte anó etok mmóiŋ enye imaha, ndem isoj eyak usuŋ yak ami nka idim". Eto ama okob mbom abaŋ enye, ayuŋ asio nkók-eto ke'usuŋ anó enye usuŋ afró.

Ke edi saŋa nka iso, ndik ye uteŋe omum Adiahia Anwa ke ini anye adaha okut akwa idem ekpe ke iso. Ahiahia Anwa ayem usuŋ ufiak-edem, ado anye Ekere naŋa eyen abi kpa-mkpa ye ebiomi Nwa Udo, ado anó anye uko ye isoj-esit adi boyo nka iso. Anye Ekere ke esit ate nyánam afid se ukeme amen, nnyá boyo ubioŋo ami nte nke boyoke ake eto m kpó-ufók nyin.

Adiaha Anwa amen isaŋ aka iso, ake sim akwa idem ekpe, ye idorenyin ke ekpe idi taha imó. Ndien asio ikwó akwó, “Ami mmediójó ke mfin ado usen ndem-isoŋ, ikpinaha ami nka idim, ado ke ntak ndiók-idem eyen mi, ami nkikana nka idim ku usen edem, ndien mmekpe nwani-nnyin ubók nte anó etok mmonj enye imaha, ndem isoŋ eyak usuŋ yak ami nka idim”. Idim-ekpe ama asio uyo, ayuŋ ayek isim ekpe, ado uyo-emem, Adiaha Anwa ayak emem aba ke’isoŋ. Ekpe ama asik ada ke usuŋ, ayak ufaŋ anó Adiaha Anwa aboyo. Adiaha awek iwek aduok anaŋa ikaba, ndien amen isaŋ aka iso, ikanake iso ke edem, mmbak adikid ayie ndik ekpe.

Iki kpeneke, Adiaha Anwa adisim, iso idim. Adiaha Anwa asuk ibuot ke’isoŋ ndien asio ikwó akwó, “Ami mmediójó ke mfin ado usen idem, ikpinaha ami nka idim, ado ke ntak ndiók-idem eyen mi, ami nkikana nka idim ku usen edem, ndien mmekpe nwani-nnyin ubók nte anó etok mmoŋ enye imaha, ndem isoŋ eyak usuŋ yak ami mbó mmoŋ idim”

Ndem isoŋ nyin, anó-owo ayen, mbok nwam mien, kop eseeme mmi, ntak ayen anam nsaja isaŋ ukud, tua eka nnaneyin mbom, koro ndoho owo mkpó-nnam.

Iki kpeneke, Adiaha Anwa ake sio uyo, akpa idim ama atimedé, oyobio asiaha ke akpa idim, ke ufód oyobio, Ndem isoŋ asio uyo, ate eyen mi di, kufehe-ndik, saŋa kpere, yóhó abaj mfo ye mmoŋ idim, koro ima esit eka ak-umen adi. Tóŋó-ntak bó abaj ntimkpó mmi, abaj uforo ye abaj ntimkpó, amasesim ufok, men mme eno-ubok mmi no ayen. Mum-esit, ndien yuŋ kwoko mmóŋ-eyet, sia ami mme kud, mme-yuŋ ndióŋó mkpukpuru mkpó.

Ekamba idara ye inemesit ama óyóhó Adiaha Anwa esit, ndien anye adaka isaŋ uyónjó ke óyóhó idaraesit. Mme inuen ke ikpa-enyoŋ, ekene edian-uyo idaraesit ke ikwó.

Adiaha Anwa ama akesim ufók, ama óyóhó abaŋ-mmóŋ Nwa Udo ye mmóŋ, ndomo mmóŋ kiet ikiduókóke, Adiaha Anwa atóŋóntak akpój usan mmóŋ awan-ammó anó-anye.

Ado Nwa Udo ikikopo inemesit ibaŋ mmoŋ ami, sia anye ake akama ke, isin-eyin abaja mme nti-eno ndem isoŋ ake-nóhó Adiaha Anwa. Ndien eyen abiere ke esit amó ate “ami nya kene nka, idim, mbak nke bó mme ukem enó ake Adiaha Anwa abóhó. Koro ndem-isóŋ ado mkpó ufók-nnyin” “ke akpaniko, ndem isóŋ aya anó udeme ake-mmi”

Kini kiet, Nwa Udo amen abaŋ adot ke ibuot, afehe adaka isaŋ uka idim. Ikereke ke ema inim ibed uka idim, ke usen akwa ederi. Ndien ofum ayeŋe akwa eto eyop, ye nkók-eto ado iki biójóke Nwa Udo. Akwa idem-ekpe ama okun ado idakake ide, ado ikikpana Nwa Udo. Ke Nwa Udo adisim iso idim, Nwa Udo iki-timmeke ndem isoŋ, inama ido ukpono ndem-isoŋ, ndien aye amen abaŋ-mmóŋ asin ke idim. Ada abed adibó enó nti-mkpó nto ubók nden- isoŋ.

Ndien akpa idim ama odobo ke etuk-ini, akem oyobio atimide iso idim. Mmóŋ-idim ama amen Nwa Udo, ndien Nwa Udo ama ayaŋa idem ado ikikana ibókóh, iyuŋó ikan iwók ewók iwó ke idim.

Ndien uyo ndem isoŋ awó ate : “Nwa Udo afo tohmmo enyiŋ-mi, ado udiójóke ibed mmi, amem esuene adi ki iso mmi. “Ke mfri eto, ke esidiójó eto”.

Sia ami ndoho “adue-ukod, akpa itoŋ” isin-eyen mfo amen mkpa adi itie mfo. Ido mfo anie ndik, idoto enyiŋ mmi. Nwan-ufip mbufo akedi ke iso mmi ke ntak nnan-eyin, ado afo adi ke iso mmi, ke ntak isin eyin.

Mme nke Ibibio ate “Ekpefre ntak, ntak atoho” ntak akemen Adiahia Anwa aka asáŋasáŋa idem ke usen ibed idim.

Idahami offriowo ediónjó se Adiahia Anwa akenam ano ayen. Adiahia Anwa ake saŋ̄a isaj̄ ukud, isaj̄ ibuotidem, isaj̄ ima esit eka.

Adiahia Anwa amanie ima ano offriowo, ndien anye akesenanam se ukeme amo akan, se naŋ̄a adiahia ake yaŋ̄a ayen ado mi.



# The Great Woman, Yigoro

*Mandja, Central African Republic*

If I call them cowards they will tell me I am old  
And wonder why someone like me would dare to be so bold  
But I have no fear, let it be heard, let it be told  
I am Yigoro, the greatest woman you'll behold

I don't want to speak, I don't want to waste my breath  
One thing I must do before I die and leave this earth  
This one thing I have desired since the day of my birth  
To punch and kick and bite and slap, even if unto death

You must understand, this need to fight runs in my blood  
I'm an angry hen ready to fight, brood or no brood  
I want it more than water, I want it more than good food  
Fighting is the only thing that brightens up my mood

They run when I come calling, they don't want to hear my voice  
They tell me I am too loud, that I should stop making such noise  
I try to argue, they start trembling like frightened boys  
They don't realize that they have left me with no choice

Come and see this big male goat, look at its horns so fine  
They curl up to the sky as if by Ngokala's design  
An animal I'm very glad to consider as mine  
Maybe this is what I need for them to cross the line

I take it to the right, then I take it to the left  
I take it to the North and South, the East and then the West  
I show the goat to everyone, I try my very best  
But they all refuse to fight, they fail this simple test

The next morning I take my goat and go a different way  
Walking to a village far away from where I stay  
There I ask the people just to hear what I would say  
But they all refuse, they wouldn't fight even for pay

But I'm Yigoro, I am not easily deterred  
I am a great woman, it is just as you have heard  
If I say I must fight, you must know I'll keep my word  
Fighting is the only thing for which I've ever cared

So once again I go in search of someone who would fight  
Someone who will make it good, who won't make it light  
Who punches, kicks and bites and slaps and throws with  
all their might  
Someone who will see it through and not give in to fright

Tere is the first person I meet who has the gall  
I really should've known, he is the vainest of them all

Tere, man of strength! So very big and tough and tall  
I guess he thinks this will be quick because I'm weak and small

I let him have his way, I let him win on the first round  
I let him pick me up and throw me on the dirty ground  
I don't move a muscle, I remain where I fall down  
Even as he takes my goat, I don't make a sound

They slaughter him to eat, they really just couldn't resist  
They slaughter him to eat, they slaughter my beloved beast  
Then gather round to drink, and have themselves a merry feast  
They leave nothing for me, they could have done that  
much, at least

The next morning, I wait for Tere right by his front door  
He comes out yawning, not knowing just what I have in store  
I am Yigoro, I am a fighter to the core  
Today he will see what he has never seen before

I throw him down, he stands up, and I throw him down again  
He stands up and I throw him down again and then again  
I don't listen to his pleas, I don't care for his pain  
I throw him down until no strength, in his body, remains

I come back the next day. Ha! Did you think that I am done?  
I come prepared to fight again, I show up like the dawn  
I throw Tere on the ground, throw him till his strength is gone  
I throw Tere on the ground, throw him till the sun goes down

We go on for a week, and each time we fight I win  
I can see how Tere's spirit withers from within  
I can see his body growing weak and gaunt and thin  
I can see the worried faces of his next of kin

One morning, I come to fight feeling strong and alive  
Tere doesn't come outside but sends one of his wives  
She begs me not to fight that day or Tere won't survive  
I tell her she must take his place since they'd rather connive

She doesn't even last a round, she runs back in the house  
And drags her husband out, look at him cry, the prideful louse  
He walked into my trap just like a greedy little mouse  
He wastes his tears on me, I have no sympathy to rouse

I know mischief's afoot when I arrive the next morning  
And hear people in Tere's village wailing and mourning  
When I reach his house, I see his family crying  
They tell me he is dead, but I know they are lying

*Since Tere is dead, I say, I have this one demand  
One which stands in accordance with the laws of the land  
One of you must take his place, for Tere you must stand  
You all ate my goat, so surely, you do understand*

Tere's second wife was foolish enough to come out  
But when I threw her down she told the truth with a great shout:  
*Tere is not dead! I have the proof without a doubt  
Look in that fresh grave you'll see what I'm talking about!*

I found him like she said, I found him hiding in the grave  
I wonder why they tried, there's barely anyone to save  
His people really should've never let him misbehave  
Or listened to any of the assurances he gave

I take pity on the poor man the next time that we meet  
I know that he won't make it from the moment that we greet  
He tells me that he would like some sesame seeds to eat  
And asks me for a handful from the gourd in which they sit

I really should've remembered that Tere is a trickster  
A scoundrel and a liar and a very shameless swindler  
So when I lift up the gourd and the sesame seeds scatter  
I realize what he has done, this ever-scheming cheater

*For your goat, you've beat me down until I'm thin and weak  
So I went to Brakele so me and him could speak  
I did well for he's the one who showed me this small trick  
Now you have no choice but to go on your knees and pick*

I pick and pick and pick but there is just no end to this  
I gather them and pile them up but still many I miss  
Meanwhile Tere insists that I restore all what is his  
He knows that he has won the fight, the thought fills him  
with bliss

I surrender the fight that day, I know I'll not last  
For Brakele is more than wise, he's the god of the past  
He knows more than a trick or two, the things he knows  
are vast  
I leave Tere in peace, I leave his village walking fast

*The End*



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# About the Author

Helen Nde is a Cameroonian-born researcher, writer and artist currently based in Atlanta, GA. She curates Mythological Africans, an online space for exploring mythology, folklore, spirituality, and culture from the African continent. You can find her on Twitter as @MythicAfricans and @hm\_nde.



**For information about the original stories,  
and the cultures from which they come,  
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